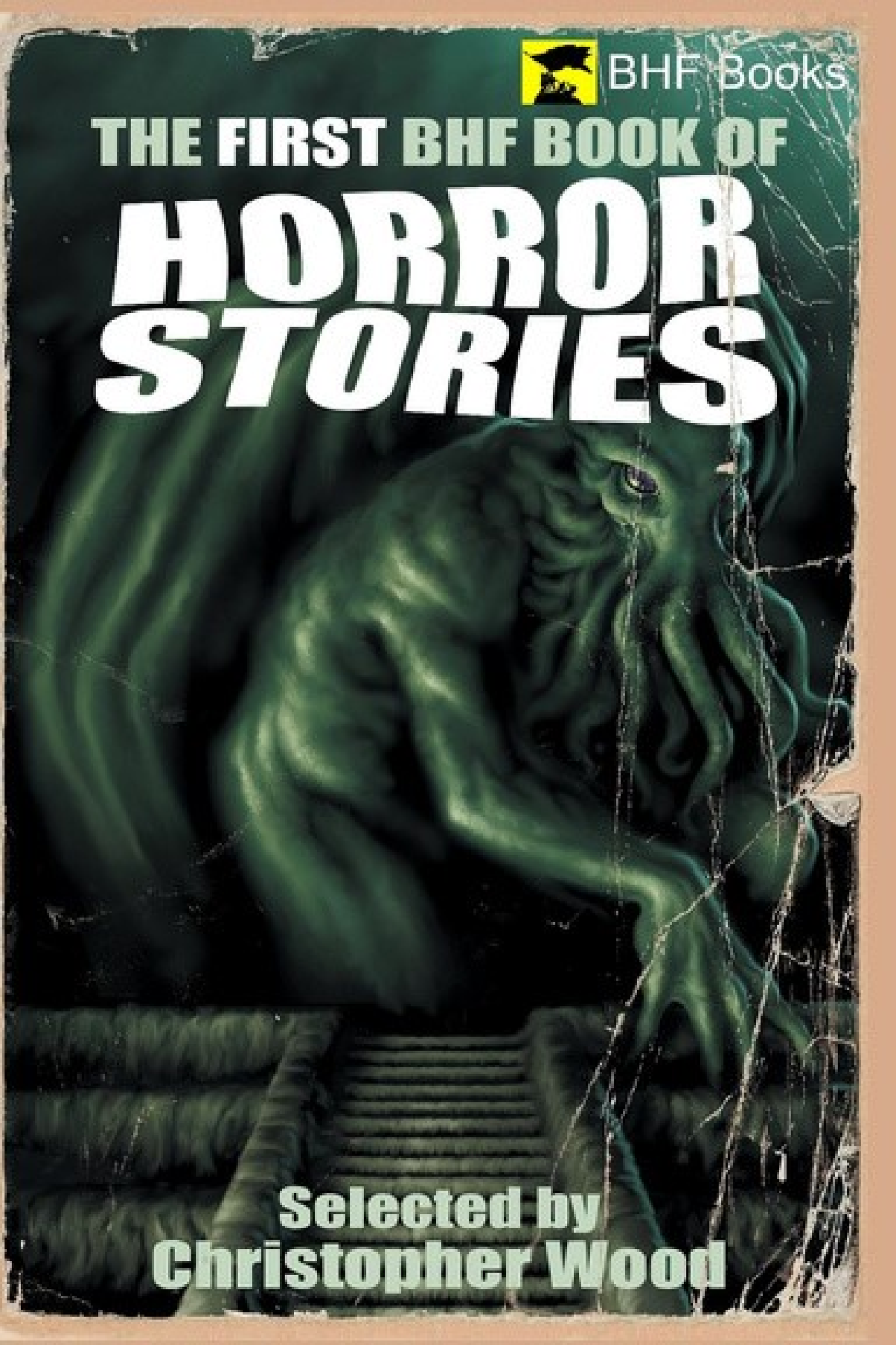
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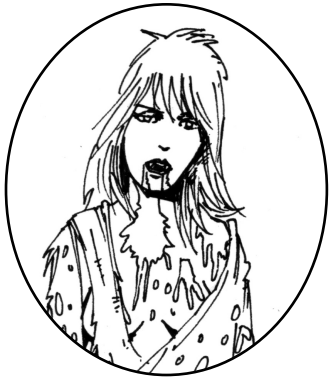

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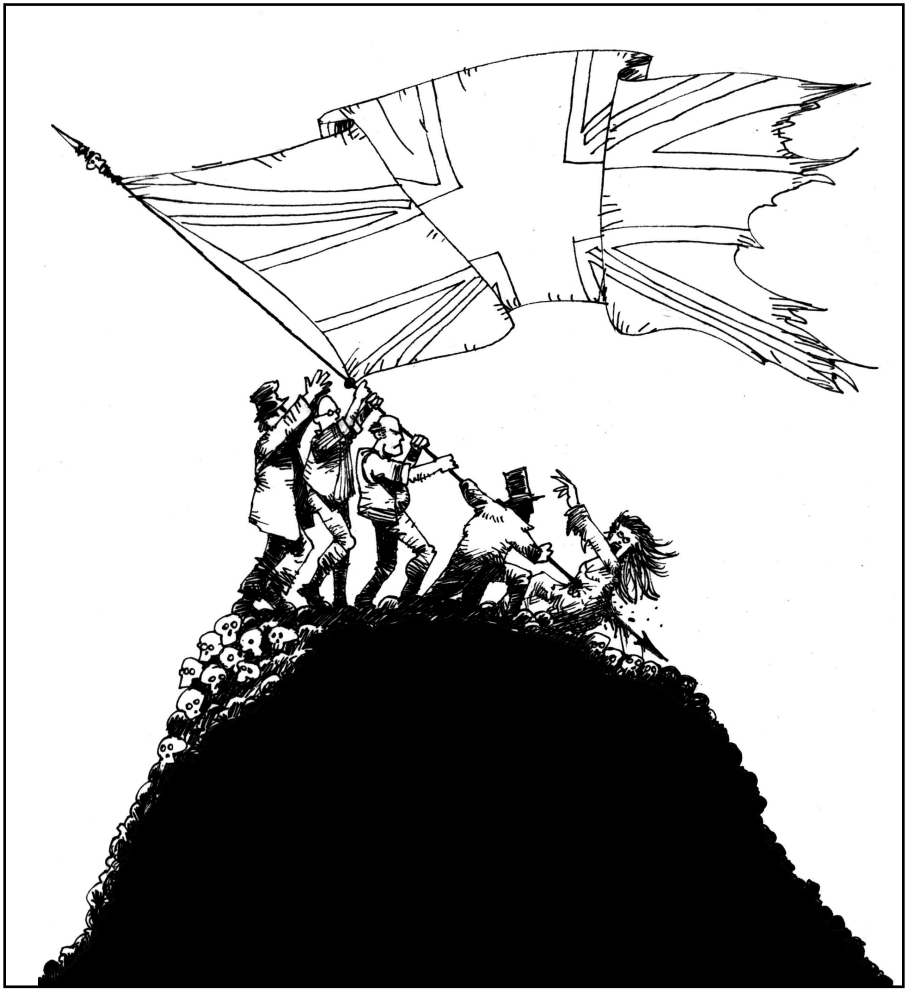
THE FIRST BHF BOOK OF
HORROR STORIES

Edited by
CHRISTOPHER WOOD
chris@britishhorrorfilms.co.uk



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CONTENTS

ANTHONY CLARKE IS SICK	John Reppion	11
BRIERLEY DAY	Wendell McKay	17
BENEATH YOU	Albie Swain	37
EDWARD	Christopher Wood	41
FAMILY MAN	Wayne Mook	62
FRESH SOULS	Billy Turner	65
SURFACE TENSION	Neil Christopher	75
THE MAN	James Brough	85
THE HERMIT	Billy Turner	89
THE CASE OF THE FRAGRANT PHANTOM	Matt Bowdler	93
STORM DOG	Paul Newman	99
SIDNEY	Billy Turner	113
SECRET RECIPE	Neil Christopher	119
SPAGHETTI HEAD	Christopher Wood	125
BEGGARS BANQUET	James Stanger	131
THEY THAT DWELL IN DARK PLACES	Daniel McGachey	145
THE CALLING OF THE SEA	Billy Turner	161
QUIET DESPERATION	James Brough	163
HOTEL NAIADE	Wendell McKay	167

ILLUSTRATIONS

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To contact any of the creators, in the first instance contact Chris via e-mail on chris@britishhorrorfilms.co.uk.

INTRODUCTION

A couple of years ago now, someone posted a topic on the British Horror Films website about Pan books of horror, and what a defining effect they had had on their childhood. Back in the 70s, this person wrote, everyone's parents had a battered edition of one of these anthologies lurking somewhere in their bedroom. A gaudily covered collection of tales "guaranteed to freeze the blood" (a guarantee which probably wouldn't stand up in civil court) written by a bunch of authors ranging from the semi-famous (MR James, R Chetwynd-Hayes, Robert Bloch) to the never heard from again (erm…).

Pan's books of horror disappeared from the shelves of the nation's bookshops some time in the early 80s, either because of a law suit involving a reader whose innards didn't turn to ice as promised, or (more likely) because people looking for cheap thrills could now rent them on VHS. Poor old MR James had to give way to Umberto Lenzi, and the reign of the Pan Books Of Horror (over eight million books in this series sold!) came to an end.

Now, my parents never read a Pan Book Of Horror, or if they did, they made sure not to leave it lying around where their scaredy cat of a young son could spot it.

But this post on my website piqued my interest. What were these books of which this bloke wrote? And where could I find them?

Well, the answer to the second question was "pretty much everywhere" – charity shops, second hand bookshops, the Internet – which led to an answer to the first question. Which was "a strangely compelling ragbag of short stories, with cheap second hand prices making them easily collectable". I'd soon amassed a small collection of the series, along with a hotchpotch of other, similar works (*The Fontana Books Of Horror*, *The Pan Books Of Ghosts*, etc).

Pan's books had started in the early 60s, with painted covers and Victorian and faux Victorian tales of Gothic horror, but had moved with the times, and by the turn of the 70s had mutated into nasty little anthologies of modern terror, complete with OTT photographic covers awash with blood and guts. As tastes changed they got more and more lurid, giving quick fixes of sex and violence to over eight million readers (allegedly).

Sadly, these days we are told that the market for short stories of any genre has pretty much dried up. The novel rules, which is weird when you think about it. 21st century people are always on the go – they don't have time to buy records, they download them. They don't have time to go to the cinema, they have films piped into their homes through satellite dish-

es. They speed date, they eat fast food. How the bloody hell does piling through 400-odd pages of dense type equate with all that? You'd have thought that in the current climate, a pocket sized collection of twisty tales would be exactly what people would want. And perhaps they do, they just don't know it yet.

In 2004 I entered a national competition being run by the BBC, called End Of Story. And no-one was more surprised than me when I actually won the bloody thing. I picked a story started by horror writer Shaun Hutson (whose dubious body of work had pretty much passed me by up to that point). He had written a typically gritty, clunkily awful start to a tale which had a hitman board a train which no-one was particularly surprised to find out was taking him STRAIGHT TO HELL. Frank Tate (for twas his name) ended Hutson's beginning by opening the toilet door to see… an empty toilet. But what he saw in there chilled his bones (or something, I haven't read the thing for years). I finished off the tale with what I thought was an obvious idea of monsters coming out of mirrors (pretty much the only thing I thought he would see in an empty toilet cubicle) to unload eternal justice on Frank. But there was obviously more to my ending than I could see – out of the thousands of entries mine shone through, and there I was, called to that London to meet with Times critic Giles Coren (no, I haven't a clue either), Claudia Winkelman, movers and shakers from the publishing industry, and Hutson himself. The whole thing was a strangely unedifying experience, and as suspected, the film crew made me look like a twat (thank God the thing only went out on BBC3 and has never been repeated). But it did tell me one thing – people liked what I wrote. And I was now a published author, of sorts.

Please bear with me, this Ronnie Corbett style meandering monologue is going somewhere, honest.

One of my passions is old British horror films. Not gory splatter movies, but the weird, not-scary, slightly camp offerings from the 50s, 60s and 70s. And a big part of that genre was the anthology films like *Dead Of Night* (my absolute favourite of all time), *From Beyond The Grave*, *Asylum*, *The House That Dripped Blood* and *Tales From The Crypt*. Many of the stories from these films can be found in the Pan Books Of Horror in one form or another. In 2000 I started a hobby website which aimed to chronicle my passion in a vaguely piss-takey way. As the years went by it became an immensely popular site, and at the time of writing is still one of the top 10 horror film websites *in the world*. Not bad for a lad from Sandbach.

The site has its own forum, which allows other fans of British horror to chat to each other. In 2004, fired up by my success in End Of Story, I set up a section on the forum to allow people to post their own works of fiction for other to critique. And what appeared blew me away (and made me slightly jealous, truth be told). There are a lot of very talented people out there.

As I've already said, many British horror films have a peculiar style of their own. And fans of these films have similar… similarities. This anthology pulls together the best of the first wave of works posted on the "Your Creations" section of the forum, and I think that each one of them would fit perfectly into an anthology film from the 60s or 70s. They are scary, disturbing, funny, and – wherever they might be set – have a peculiar "Britishness" all of their own.

But that's not all. Also using the forum are a collection of artists who, on hearing that this book was to be created, wanted to be part of it. So, *unlike* the Pan Books it imitates so slavishly, this book is highly illustrated with some amazing scribblings. I hope you'll forgive this slight deviation from the original books, pulp paperback pedants.

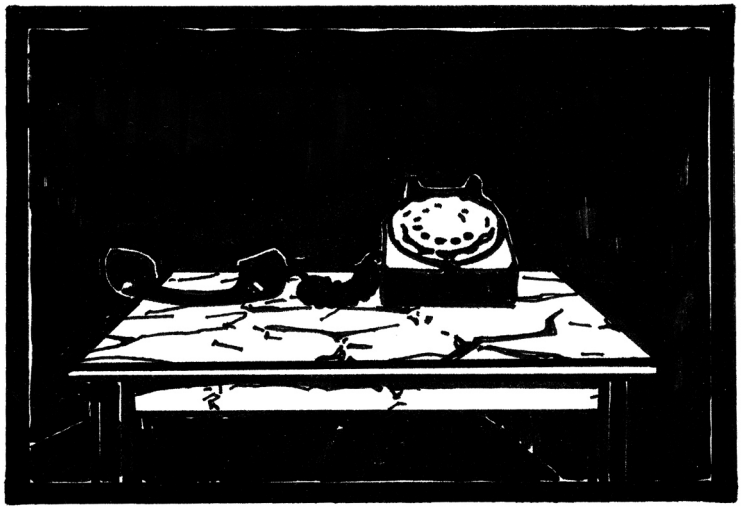
This collection is quite wonderful, even if I do say so myself. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I have enjoyed bringing it all together.

Christopher Wood
July 2006

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not have been possible without the thoroughly nice people who frequent the British Horror Films website. I might pay the bills, but you make it what it is, chaps!

....and I have to say thanks to Emma, obviously. The poor girl has a lot to put up with.



ANTHONY CLARKE IS SICK

By John Reppion

Anthony Clarke stuck out his arm and banged the bleating alarm clock with his fist, cracking its feeble red plastic casing and knocking it on to the bedroom floor. The alarm's digital whine continued, now slightly muffled by the drift of mucus soaked tissues it had landed amongst. Anthony Clarke groaned and rolled sideways out of bed. He landed on his knees amid the paper and snot and lifted the evil timepiece close to his bleary eyes. It was 2:15pm. Gently Anthony depressed the tiny button on top of the clock, which stopped the alarm.

"Shit."

Anthony Clarke was ill. He had been ill for two weeks now. The thing was that Anthony Clarke was a very particular type of ill; he was coughing and sneezing, he had headaches that came and went, he couldn't sleep because his nose and throat filled up with mucus the moment he lay down, but none of that was the real problem. He was drained. Anthony Clarke was too ill to go to work, but not ill enough to actually have an illness with a cause or a name. The doctor said it was a cold.

"No cure for the common cold I'm afraid." But then everyone knows that. So, countless Lemsips and Beechams powders and Vapo rubs later, here he was festering in his own incurable filth. The doctor had offered him a sick note but for some reason Anthony Clarke had declined. It wasn't that Anthony Clarke had intended to work through his illness; he had plenty of sick days and even holidays owing to him. It was just that he didn't care anymore.

Anthony Clarke worked in an office; he didn't have a job title, he just worked in an office. Sometimes Anthony wondered what it was that he actually did for a living. He had started the job exactly one week after he left school. Anthony's father had dragged him down to the local Job Centre, and there was the card:

"Wanted. School leavers to work in office."

Anthony had worked there for five years now. At first he'd almost enjoyed it; the way people looked through him, the way no one knew his name. Occasionally people would ask him to shred paper or photocopy something, but Anthony soon learned how to look busy enough to avoid all that. The problem was, even without any work to do, the office was still sucking away at his soul. In many ways it was worse than actually working there; he felt like a ghost, unable to interact with the living caricatures which would've been his colleagues if they could see him. Anthony Clarke was privy to all the gossip, all the backstabbing and all the double-dealing, but he had no interest in any of it. It was like being

contracted to watch a very boring soap opera or to repeatedly read an especially poor book. Anthony had repeatedly tested the levels of his invisibility at work. Small things at first, like coming in five minutes late or leaving five minutes early. Then he had stopped shaving, and then stopped getting his hair cut. No one noticed anything until, one day he had decided to come in without his tie. Suddenly he was visible again; the whole office had stopped and stared at him as if seeing him for the first time. Thinking fast, Anthony Clarke had turned and ran out of the building as quickly as he could and bought another tie. He never wanted anyone to look at him like that again.

So this was his latest test. His final test? He hadn't rang in sick, he had no sick note. He was going to get fired. Anthony Clarke shuffled naked across the dirty lino of the kitchen floor and filled the kettle with water. The blinds and curtains of his flat had been closed ever since the onset of his illness, and dust motes danced in the brilliant chinks of sunlight which penetrated here and there. He plugged the kettle in and went to the fridge to sniff the milk. Anthony was too bunged up to smell anything but the absence of lumps when he shook the bottle satisfied him that it'd do. After making himself a cup of tea Anthony Clarke shuffled back into the bedroom and crawled under the stinking covers. He sat in the darkness and sipped his brew. Maybe this was it, he thought; maybe he'd never have to work again. Maybe they'd just keep paying him whether he was there or not. But no, he couldn't stand that. He needed to be rid of that place. He needed not to work there anymore. Anthony Clarke had thought about resigning, or turning up at the office drunk, or punching someone from accounts, but the memory of that day, the day without his tie still haunted him. He couldn't stand for them to see him, to really see him. Anthony washed down a decongestant tablet with the last swig of his tea. Then, the phone rang. It was the first time it had rang since Anthony's illness had begun. He sat perfectly still. The phone rang. He closed his eyes. The phone rang. He gritted his teeth. The phone rang. Suddenly, Anthony Clarke leapt out of bed and ran to the living room. Turning a corner he skidded on last weeks newspaper and fell onto the floor, burning his knees on the coarse, grimy carpet. Sliding across the floor he grabbed for the telephone which stood on a little table next to the couch. Having come to a complete stop, lying face down on the carpet Anthony Clarke put the receiver to his ear.

"Hello?"

Dial tone.

Panting heavily, Anthony Clarke climbed onto the couch. His knees were bleeding. He dialled 1471.

"You were called today at fourteen twenty-one. We do not have the caller's number… Please hang up. Please hang up. Please."

Anthony banged the receiver into its cradle. He sneezed and spit and snot exploded in a cloud before him. He picked up a balsam tissue, blew his nose noisily and fell back bonelessly onto the dusty couch. Was that it? Had he missed the call? But, they'd call back wouldn't they? Maybe it was good that he hadn't answered it. Maybe they'd think he was really ill now. Maybe he *was* really ill. All of a sudden, Anthony Clarke had an idea. He thought about it. Yes, it was definitely an idea. Anthony Clarke licked his grey lips and tried a smile. It didn't work but he felt better for trying. He turned his idea over once more in his mind. Anthony Clarke picked up the telephone, dialled the number of his office and then the extension number for accounts. He was surprised that he remembered it so clearly, but then what else did he have to remember? He licked his lips again, his head was buzzing but maybe that was just the amphetamine based decongestant taking effect. A familiar voice crackled down the line and Anthony Clarke had to hold back a gasp of excitement.

"Hello, accounts. Debbie speaking."

Anthony Clarke closed his eyes and sucked as much air into his lungs as he could.

"Hello?"

Anthony Clarke spat out his idea.

"Hello, I'd like to speak to Anthony Clarke please, Debbie."

Silence.

"Debbie, can you get me Anthony Clarke please?"

Anthony Clarke held back a giggle, which turned into a Phlegmy cough but he recovered quickly and almost grinned.

"Anthony Clarke?" she sounded unsure, as if reminded of something distant; something forgotten. Then in a shout muffled by her turning away from the receiver she called his name. "Anthony Clarke? Anyone here called Anthony Clarke?"

Anthony Clarke braced himself for an outburst. He was going to demand to speak to himself. He wasn't going to take no for an answer. And when they denied all knowledge of him he was going to give them everything; name, address, date of birth, national insurance number, the date he had started working there, everything until they had no option but to acknowledge his existence. Anthony Clarke actually grinned a little. Another voice came on the line.

"H-hello?" it was the voice of a young man, or possibly, a boy. Anthony Clarke's grin faded. He thought for a moment then tried again.

"Hello, I'd like to speak to Anthony Clarke."

"Erm, yes that's me."

Anthony's sinuses throbbed suddenly. He shut his eyes tight, then opened them as wide as he could; the room blurred in and out of focus.

"No. I want to speak to Anthony Clarke."

The voice on the other end hesitated. The boy sounded scared.

"Yes, erm, yes Sir. I'm Anthony Clarke. I-I just started today Sir."

Anthony Clarke began to sweat. What was going on? Then he remembered something; there *was* another Anthony Clarke. On his first day in the office when he was fifteen someone had rung up for him and Anthony had been given the call by mistake. But that was five years ago. Almost to the day, now he came to think about it. And…Anthony Clarke's blood froze. He slammed down the phone.

Anthony Clarke handed the phone back to the woman at her desk.

"He-he's gone." He said. The woman ignored him and hung up the phone. Anthony Clarke hesitated for a moment and then walked away. He didn't know where he was going; he hadn't been given anything to do. He didn't mind though. All Anthony Clarke wanted was to blend in and to be left alone. He liked the fact that no one knew his name and that no one asked him what he was doing or where he was going. That was because he was a grown up now and he could do whatever he wanted. Anthony Clarke adjusted his tie. Perhaps tomorrow, thought Anthony Clarke, I'll ring in sick and have the day off.

(c) John Reppion 2006

BRIERLEY DAY

by Wendell McKay

For centuries, Brierley Hall stood in a green pastoral idyll, insinuating its dire scent into the gentle, rolling hills and softly shadowed copses. There had always been something uncanny about the place, which pleased its inhabitants of four hundred years, the noble and fervently private Houghtons, members of whom had been killed on all seven continents. The honest, hardworking folk of the nearby village of Mettleford tended to avoid the place, especially at night.

Frank Wilkins, the village sage and wantonly gregarious publican of the Shorn Badger, was fonder of nothing else than seizing on the odd stranger or group thereof, and regaling them with stories of the regional legends, a great many centering on Brierley Hall and the Ramble Fens. These latter surrounded the Hall like a castle's moat struck by the Almighty. Fixing the unsuspecting interloper with a gimlet stare over a full pint of Fuller's, Frank would spin yarn after yarn - witches' covens, diabolical sorcerers, mad scientists, all had their day, mostly in and around Brierley Hall. The Houghtons numbered as many hellbound heretics as perished paladins, and their notorious reticence only rendered their legacy more mysterious.

Brierley Hall itself rested atop an island of sorts, a great mound of fixed earth ringed with a foul jelly of soil, marsh, and greenery that steamed on unpredictable occasions. The fens formed a ragged, irregular semicircle, with the Hall connected to the outside world by a thin strip of land surmounted by a rough driveway. Passing drivers would occasionally swear the driveway's entrance was thronged by more than the usual number of crows.

One chill autumn evening, Sir Geoffrey Houghton, the latest head of the family, stood outside the front entrance, grimly surveying his sinister patrimony. The house was originally Tudor, with a number of Jacobean and Victorian neo-Gothic additions, creating a strangely curvy impression that made Sir Geoffrey speculate on spiritual English forbears of Antoní Gaudí. He'd thought many times about selling the entire place, perhaps fleeing to Grand Cayman, but he knew it was too late. There was too much legacy, too much history. He could no more honestly conceive of forsaking his family's birthright than he could of converting to Rastafarianism. He pulled his coat about his shoulders and peered into the thick wood that fringed the driveway into the world. That evening would be his granddaughter Elizabeth's eighteenth birthday. A day of choices, and a day of reckoning.

"Granddad!" Elizabeth, Sir Geoffrey's eldest's youngest, was beautiful in a quiet, unassuming but incontestable way, a flower caught off guard sunning itself by the wheatstalks. She'd driven up to Brierley in her atrocious, unsightly automobile, a legacy of her late parents' ridiculous notion that to live beneath one's station was somehow acceptable. She dressed in the same way, too, with a coat no doubt provided by Oxfam and a skirt that should have wreathed the legs of some sexless Bolshevik commissar. Only the boots seemed to be of a certain quality.

Sir Geoffrey reflected, as he took his granddaughter in his arms, that no amount of left-wing sartorial idiocy could ever disguise Elizabeth's unquenchable loveliness. Her chestnut hair curled close and long about her head, her pretty blue eyes twinkling and her face beaming as she forsook her grandfather's overly dignified greeting, flinging her arms around him. She had always been devoted to him, he knew, and the thought sent a quick stab of hopeless longing through his heart.

"Elizabeth, my dear, I cannot tell you how much it pleases me to see you here once again." He spoke in a scolding manner he didn't really mean.

"Granddad, you know I had exams!" She kissed him on the cheek and began to walk with him up the steps of the entrance to Brierley Hall. "Tell me, is Jenkins still…" Her voice trailed behind her as the great doors slowly shut. A hush came over the drive, as if the humans' departure left the field open for nature to once more take its untroubled course. A crow lit on Elizabeth's ancient Volvo as a shuffling, wheezing figure dressed in a black overcoat poked its head above the hedge on the other side of the drive.

It began to laugh, very silently, the slightly nervous laugh of one who had waited an impossibly long time for a thwarted desire and was now about to see it come to pass, unsure if such a thing could possibly be true.

Its red eyes gleamed, staring at the house with a hateful joy as darkness fell.

The dining room of Brierley Hall shrunk from the arch and disapproving gazes of past Houghton family portraits, Cavalier rakehell Richard Houghton and Victorian electroshock pioneer Frederick Houghton most prominent among them. Too much of the family silver had been sold off over the years, too much history silently decaying now in suburban semi-detached prisons. Sir Geoffrey felt their disapproval and commiserated, but there was really little that he could do. Would they prefer the Hall itself to be tossed off to the National Trust?

He dined with Elizabeth that evening on leftovers of cold trout and a California chardonnay of which he was inexplicably fond, as the hour of her arrival had been late. Since it was only the two of them, they dined

opposite each other towards the head of the table, the head itself remaining unoccupied. Elizabeth contented herself with a salad.

Jenkins, in service to the Houghtons since Suez, occasionally drifted by the two asking if "anything more was required," and leaving behind the unmistakable aroma of servile disapproval.

"Jenkins is much like myself, my dear," explained Sir Geoffrey. "He prefers the old ways, as do I - lord of the manor at the head of the table, and so on. This, however, is a special occasion."

"I feel special," Elizabeth replied, blushing a little.

"And how could my favorite grandchild feel otherwise?" Sir Geoffrey only had two grandchildren. Elizabeth's two older brothers, Richard and Gareth, had been killed in the same auto accident that claimed the lives of her parents. Her cousin Jason suffered in Sir Geoffrey's estimation due to his scape-gallows father, Gerard Houghton. "Have you decided yet what your plans are after exams?"

"I'm definitely taking a year off. I'd like to visit America, see Jason…"

As she spoke, Sir Geoffrey leaned back in his seat and briefly contemplated the ceiling, which, as always, was flat, not vaulted. He dearly wished to spare the girl the ordeal that lay ahead, but rules were rules and family was family. Especially in these trying times, desperate measures were required. Sir Geoffrey struggled to pay attention to Elizabeth's plan for saving the world, but kept running off the rails due to a growing sadness that wouldn't leave.

"Granddad, I feel so awful for you. You live in this drafty old hall day in, day out, with only Jenkins for company and no one to cheer you up."

Jenkins suddenly appeared by the table to hear her final comment.

"Oh! Jenkins, I didn't mean… I'm sorry." Elizabeth winced sheepishly.

"It's perfectly all right, Miss Elizabeth. I'm actually quite proud of being what the Americans refer to as a 'buzzkill.'" He passed once more out of vision, leaving Elizabeth with the likelihood that he actually did enjoy being a buzzkill.

"I daresay I'm not much better," laughed Sir Geoffrey. "Speaking… of which, I'm afraid I shall be conscripting you for a social engagement here two nights from now."

"Oh no." Elizabeth had forgotten. "Not Brierley Day."

"Brierley Day," Sir Geoffrey mournfully affirmed. Brierley Day was a long, hallowed tradition of the district, meant to celebrate the legendary routing of the evil sorcerer Henry "Blackheart" Burlinson, who had held sway in and around Mettleford until the arrival of the heroic Sir Edward Houghton, recently returned from service against the Turks in Venetian Cyprus. The latter overthrew Burlinson's nefarious power forever, an

event celebrated every decade afterward in pantomime and increasingly drunken shenanigans.

"What do I have to do?" Elizabeth sounded like the condemned, already guessing her fate.

"You play the part of Lady Carthorpe, won by Sir Edward from the diabolical clutches of the hateful necromancer." Sir Geoffrey tried to look cheerful.

"Who'll be Sir Edward?"

"I believe it to be Nick Crossley, the postman's boy." "Is he cute?"

Sir Geoffrey smiled. "I really couldn't say."

Elizabeth laughed at what she imagined to be his discomfiture.

After dinner, they enjoyed a few glasses of port before bedtime by the fireplace, where Jenkins had set up a nice, roaring blaze. Central heating was nice, but some things simply couldn't ever be faked. Sir Geoffrey and Elizabeth talked mostly of the past, childhood memories, unpursued paths, and other lacunae until the clock struck midnight.

"My goodness!" Sir Geoffrey rose to ring Jenkins so the latter could extinguish the fire as Elizabeth let loose an anguished groan.

"Can't you do that yourself, Granddad?" she teased.

"Jenkins would have me throttled. Tradition is everything. Family is everything."

"I've been thinking about that. I mean, we're all that's left, aren't we? You, me, Uncle Gerry, and Jason. Everyone else… they're gone."

"Yes, my dear. We're all the family we have," Sir Geoffrey observed with a sad smile. "We have to think of the greater good. Nobody else will."

Elizabeth nodded seriously at his words.

"Now, come-I'll show you to your room. You should like it; it's your Uncle Gerry's."

Elizabeth lay awake for some time beneath the rust-colored covers of Uncle Gerry's bed, her head nestled on the pillow and her eyes peering out the window with its forbidding iron grille. The sky had grown turbulent, silver-tinged clouds jostling each other for preeminence as stray moonlight caught on their undersides. Elizabeth huffed softly, wondering if Uncle Gerry had ever shagged anyone in that bed, and whether she'd ever meet anyone as charming… or irresponsible. Malik was sweet, but he was just so damned *nice*. She'd taken down more port than she could handle, herself, but it seemed to make her more wakeful, not less. She reluctantly rustled out of bed and rolled over, in T-shirt and sweatpants, to Uncle George's museum-piece hi-fi.

"What have we here?" she whispered to herself. Rising, she drew close the curtains and turned on the lamp so she could rifle through Uncle Gerry's hilariously venerable collection of LPs. She smiled at some of the titles, and eventually selected Roxy Music's eponymous debut album, blowing dust off the girl sprawled lustily across the cover. She placed the record on the player and turned the volume down low, lying flat on the floor as she'd done when a little girl and thinking of her parents, Richard and Gareth, and how they weren't there anymore, to help her cope with the forgotten horrors of Brierley Day.

As "The Bob (Medley)" abruptly cut off and "Chance Meeting" began, Elizabeth began to notice a curious tingling along the floor, one that sent unanswered chills up her spine. It could have been the music, but for the fact that the chills ceased as she rose. She lay back down, only to feel them once more. Turning her head back and forth upon the floor, she suddenly saw an intermittent flash of red light underneath the door, sputtering for five seconds then vanishing.

Elizabeth sat upright, her eyes intent on the door, which glowered at her as if the face of a thoroughly disapproving and darkly mischievous Brierley Hall.

Breakfast the next morning took place at a late hour in a drastically transformed dining room. The grey skies of the previous evening had scattered to the winds, and sunlight flooded the table, floors, and walls in long, window-shaped slabs. Sir Geoffrey and Elizabeth sat at "the head" of the table once again, munching quietly on bacon and eggs (toast and eggs for Elizabeth).

"Did you sleep well last night, my dear?" Sir Geoffrey's eyes glinted.

"Yeah, Granddad. No problem." Elizabeth glanced sidelong at the window.

"The ghosts didn't trouble you, I hope?"

"Ghosts? There are ghosts at Brierley Hall?"

"Well, I couldn't say for certain…" Sir Geoffrey ceremoniously spread jam on his toast, sensing Elizabeth twist in the wind at his infuriating vagueness. "Ah! Jenkins!"

Jenkins drifted into view, carrying a feather-duster under his arm like a senior officer's swagger stick.

"Sir?"

"Have you ever seen any ghosts haunting the further recesses of Brierley?"

"I've never encountered any personally, sir, but there have been a number of sightings over the last couple of centuries… the last recorded instance during the war… Sergeant Roberta Watkins, a Wren billeted here, made the acquaintance of Sir Thomas Houghton, who had 'passed

on' two hundred years before in a drunken stupor shortly before he was to join his regiment during the 'Forty-Five. No pleasantries were exchanged, but Sergeant Watkins reported the gentleman to be 'striking.'"

"Ah, yes, I remember," grumbled Sir Geoffrey, as though he had forgotten.

Elizabeth snorted as she took a bite of her eggs.

"Thank you, Jenkins." Sir Geoffrey nodded respectfully. "Splendid job on the eggs."

"Thank you, sir. If you and Miss Elizabeth require nothing further, I shall drive into town, to do some shopping in preparation for Brierley Day."

"We'll be fine, I think, Jenkins."

"I shall excuse myself then, sir." Jenkins retreated to the kitchens just as Elizabeth was preparing to say "bye, Jenkins."

"He isn't put out by my being here, is he?" she asked timidly.

"Good Lord, no, Elizabeth! It's refreshing to have you back at Brierley, if only for a little while." Sir Geoffrey began spreading jam on another piece of toast, this time with truly mystifying force.

"I'd stay longer, Granddad, you know that. There's just so much I have to do."

"Yes, of course." The spreads of jam turned into sharp, stabbing cuts until Sir Geoffrey's toast was a mess.

"Actually, Granddad…" Elizabeth looked out the window again, watching the sunlight arch through the bare branches of the ancient oaks. "There was something awfully strange that happened last night."

"Really?" Sir Geoffrey dropped his mangled toast onto the plate and fixed Elizabeth with an unusually intense stare. "You didn't run into Black Tom yourself, did you? Evil-looking fellow, about five-eight with an eyepatch and a prominent lisp?"

Elizabeth laughed. "No, it wasn't that." She laid her forearms on the table in a suppliant manner. "I had trouble getting to sleep… and I went out to listen to Uncle Gerry's old stereo…"

"Ah. Yes, I was afraid Gerry's room might have that effect on you. Place looks like a circus clown's torture chamber."

"No, it wasn't Uncle Gerry's… things. I was lying next to the stereo, listening to the music very softly, when I saw a red light flash beneath the door. It flashed for five seconds and then it was gone."

"Was it, indeed?" Sir Geoffrey looked curiously at her. "Did you investigate at all?"

"Yes. I opened the door, but I didn't see anything. I stood there for what must have been five minutes, but nothing else happened. So I went back to bed."

"Were you able to go to sleep after that?"

"Yes, quite."

"I don't know what on earth it could have been. Perhaps it was old Annie Bayliss-she was a parlormaid here. Her young man was killed in the Crimea, she killed herself, and now walks the halls forever after with a red lantern waiting for him to return."

"Why a red lantern?"

"No idea. At least your brush with the supernatural was more beneficial than Roberta Watkins'. I rather fancied her, you know, when I came home on leave. After her encounter with Black Tom, though, I wasn't any damned good for her anymore. At least it left me clear to meet Jessica. Sadly, though, the whole place seemed to stink of gin and snuff for weeks afterward."

Elizabeth laughed heartily. She had always wanted an encounter with a ghost at Brierley.

Frank observed Jenkins' arrival in the Shorn Badger with some surprise, as did Steve Fitch and Tim Curtis, generally the only two regulars in the place at that hour. The warm, smoky ambience of the place usually had a spot for the stiff, formal correctness of a man like Bill Jenkins. Frank, when feeling uncharitable, would suspect that Jenkins felt himself above the petty issues of Mettleford's villagers, preferring to obsess over the larger concerns of "Castle Miasma," as some of the younger intelligentsia had merrily dubbed the Hall. Tradition was tradition, though, and Frank fully expected to make his rightful contribution to the upcoming Brierley Day, as did all the villagers.

Looking at Jenkins that day, one might suspect the entire holiday preparation to have fallen to pieces. Jenkins' perpetual reserve was still present, but only as a castle wall that had been sapped and was now in danger of collapse. He moved more slowly than usual, as if any increase in speed would result in a crash. As he was merely walking into a pub in the middle of the day, it was a rather unsettling impression.

He arrived at the bar and laid a shaky hand on the counter.

"Hello, Mr. Jenkins. Excited about Brierley Day tomorrow?" "Yes, thank you, Mr. Eldridge. I'd like a pint of Guinness, please." Jenkins put a few coins on the counter and glared at Steve and Tim, who swiftly redirected their own stares elsewhere as Frank pulled his Guinness.

"Sir Geoffrey all right? I hear Miss Elizabeth's back at the Hall for the weekend. It'll be nice to see her again."

"Yes. Yes, they're both very well. Keep the change, Mr. Eldridge. I'll just sit over there, towards the corner, if that's all right."

"Of course, Mr. Jenkins." Frank watched him strangely as he with-

drew to the corner table by the restrooms, staring at his glass for a while.

For that same while, Frank, Steve, and Tim carried on as normally as they could, talking over sports, politics, and agreeing "EastEnders" were crap, but what could *they* do about it? They succeeded in preserving the illusion of normalcy until Tim returned from the men's lavvy and overheard Jenkins muttering sour nothings into his glass, tan Guinness foam on his upper lip.

"Christ, I can't fucking do it. I don't think I can do it, swear to God…" He continued like this, quietly, for some time, draining his glass to the dregs in the meantime, and then leaving, nodding to the other three as he left.

Then the gossip began.

Elizabeth dressed herself for a jaunt outdoors. Sir Geoffrey declined to go with her, as he needed to… vegetate, or something. She wasn't quite sure. Grabbing a white pullover, she looked out the window at a day rapidly turning glorious. The fens looked much less sinister by daylight, more the fascinating natural curiosity they really were.

The fens themselves were the result of a retreating glacial anomaly during the Pleistocene era. Over the millennia, the depression left by the ice had filled with water from the nearby Ramble Burn, which led westwards down to the Bristol Channel, and attracted new colonies of aquatic and amphibious creatures into the county's predominantly pastoral surroundings. It was usually at this point in the explanation when Elizabeth stopped paying attention and started dreaming of her own childhood scrapes through the fens. She gloried in the place's eerie, almost primeval beauty.

The sun glinted on the smudges of water and prolific greenery, illuminating the gristly, knobby texture of the bark on the trees and revealing all manner of places to cross the depression from the peninsula to the mainland and then stroll about in the pasture around Mettleford.

Elizabeth hurried down the stairs to the main hall, noticing Sir Geoffrey in the study poking over some dusty old tome.

"Granddad… are you sure you don't want to come with me?"

"Elizabeth. I'm seventy-six years old. I can hardly go clambering about the countryside at my age, can I?"

"I suppose not. I'll probably go into Mettleford."

"Have a good time! Jenkins should be back this afternoon and we can discuss the Brierley Day fete for tomorrow."

She walked out of the entrance and, for the first time, noticed how thoroughly incongruous her car looked next to Brierley's weary majesty.

"Poor thing." Hands in pockets, she descended the steps to the drive

and began making her way for the hedge.

As she passed the car, she noticed a black-clad figure haring up the other side of the depression, slipping and tripping as if trying to escape from Brierley.

"Hey!" yelled Elizabeth. The figure kept moving, through the knots of trees that fringed the edge of the bluff. After it passed, the scene returned to its natural quiet, with only an occasional bird call to break the hypnotic monotony.

Elizabeth decided to follow it, wondering who the person was. Nodding and clenching her fists almost involuntarily, she headed off in pursuit.

As she waded through patches of water, then felt for protruding three roots that led her fitfully up the bank, Elizabeth wondered how the figure had managed to wriggle up the muddy, slippery surface so fast. She finally managed to force herself over the edge and kneel, gasping against a tree trunk. Her quarry's path was well-indicated by a considerable disturbance of the ground, with ferns trampled and shoved aside, a path she resolved to follow.

It gave her a curious thrill to think of the ferns and oaks, probably undisturbed by anyone else in years, apart from her and the person she followed. She closed her eyes and imagined herself in an alien world, like one of the old Italian films Malik loved so much. Thinking of the latter, with the country air in her lungs, a bloom on her cheeks, and a freshness in her soul, she decided, when she got back home, not to treat him like such a bloody diva.

She finally emerged in a well-trodden plot of pasture, separated from the fenlands by an old wooden fence that had fallen into considerable disrepair. Across the field, some distance toward Mettleford, she could see a black dot receding rapidly from her sight, as a few sheep darted out of its strangely jerky and frantic approach.

"I didn't mean to scare anyone," she told herself, annoyed at how silly people behaved sometimes. But then, what had he been doing by Brierley that he felt the need to skedaddle in such a bizarre fashion once he'd seen her? And was "he" even a "he"? she wondered, scolding herself for thinking in such chauvinistic terms. She might as well keep following, she figured - it looked as good a route to Mettleford as any other.

Soldiering on, she felt a little better letting the sunlight soak into her skin. A few strands of hair fell against her face, feeling warm and almost glowing. She smiled at the memory of childhood walks until she came to the sheep, who had formed themselves into a tight-knit, almost *military* formation that brought a puzzled smirk to Elizabeth's face. She wasn't entirely sure how exactly sheep were supposed to behave, but she was pretty certain it wasn't like that. They stared at her, too, almost as if

frightened of her. Shrugging it off, she continued into Mettleford.

The figure she had been pursuing watched her hungrily from behind an oak in a nearby copse, relaxing as she followed a now clearly-marked path behind the village church into Mettleford proper.

"Yes," he hissed. "Yes." He gripped the oak almost as if in pain, shuddering against it from a cold he knew no one else could feel. "*One more day*," he snarled through gritted teeth. He lifted the squirrel he had snatched from the ground, a furry little beast realizing its danger and struggling wildly for its life. The man stuffed it halfway into his mouth and ripped its head off with his teeth, spitting the thing away into the bushes and going to work on the rest with famished, desperate greed.

He crept along the edges of pastures until the light began to fade, and with it his anguish-for the passing of that particular time meant his ordeal would soon be over.

"Granddad, you didn't have anyone looking over the house today, did you?"

"Look over the house?" Sir Geoffrey offered a glass of wine to Elizabeth as they both sat in the east garden, where the Brierley Day fete would take place the next day. "Why would I want someone to do that?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "No thanks. It's just that I saw this… person running as fast as they could away from the Hall, all the way to Mettleford. I know - I followed him."

"My dear girl. Through the Fens, I'm guessing? The reason for your clothes being in such appalling condition earlier?" Sir Geoffrey laughed indulgently.

"Well… I mean, he might have been a burglar or… I don't know, some kind of stalker."

"Probably just some overenthusiastic amateur naturalist studying the Fens. I suppose my rules on trespassers put a bit of a wrench into the study of biology. I just hate to be *bothered*." Sir Geoffrey took another sip of his wine. "Splendid. I must visit Sonoma County one of these days. Did you catch your mystery man?"

"No, actually. I lost him before Mettleford. I don't think I'd make a very good stalker."

"How did you find the village?"

"A nice change from the city. Mr. Eldridge at the pub actually recognized me from when I was little."

"Yes… I keep forgetting how long it's been since you've actually been here." Sir Geoffrey lowered his glass. "You didn't run into Jenkins while you were there, did you?"

"No, I didn't see him. He's not back yet?"

"Not yet - I expect he had to drive into Felsham to pick up a few things. I ask because he… behaves very oddly when he's actually away from the Hall. Strangest thing; it's like he can't live without the place."

"That sounds like him now," said Elizabeth, hearing a car pull up in the drive.

The thunder brought on by the freak storm rattled the windowpanes in Elizabeth's bedroom while she leafed further through Uncle Gerry's record collection.

"Bloody hell." She rose from the stereo to make certain the shutters were fastened. As she drew closed the curtains, she noticed the splash of raindrops in the muck that lay in the bottom of the fens. Smiling, she wondered what had happened to the mysterious birdwatcher - if that was indeed "its" identity. Why had she scared him so?

Tiring of her search for quality progressive or art rock, and deciding to call it a night once she ran across the first Genesis album, she shuffled off to bed and got out her discman, donning her headphones and inserting one of the mix CDs Jason had sent her from America. She fell asleep listening to "Last Night I Fell Asleep On Your Floor" by Saturday Looks Good To Me, the haunting, childlike lyrics drawing her into a strange realm of twisted, poignant dreams. She writhed in her bed as faceless figures bent over her speaking in strange tongues, all deferring to another, standing in back and tangibly confident of its power.

She wandered in the dream as the figures began to absent themselves from the bedside, leaving only the one in the back, the leader. It cautiously approached her bedside and ran its hand along the edge of the far bedframe. It wore a dark cowl, which she could tell was a deep violet even in the still, murky night. It moved nearer, almost lazily smoothing the bedcovers until long, thin fingers brushed up against her leg.

An electric shock moved through her body as her music returned, mutated, twisted somehow, filling the air with discordant, keening wails and strange notes she had never before heard. A smile appeared amid the folds of the figure's cowl.

A minute later, she woke shaking, sobbing into her pillow in bewilderment and terror. She instinctively connected the man in her dream with the figure in the fields and wondered if she was going mad. Perhaps it had been her overactive imagination, the one that produced mysterious, flickering red lights along the floor.

"No," she said to herself. That had been real. She hadn't imagined it. Removing her headphones, she eventually drifted off to sleep again, wishing that she'd never come.

The dark turbulence of the previous evening had passed away, leaving a clear blue blanket of sky less electric and heartening than before, Elizabeth thought due to the lingering scent of thunder and rain. She surveyed the scene out of her bedroom window uncertainly, still nettled from her nighttime travails. After the fete, she would have to tell Granddad. *Something*.

Below, a rudimentary stage had been built by Mike Garrow and Sons, Mettleford carpenters and antique furniture dealers. The tables had been assembled by practically the entire Mettleford mercantile community-roses and bouquets from the florist, rolls and scones from the baker's, and so on. Elizabeth smiled to think of them going to all that trouble, all that local pride and tradition expending itself every year for a half-hour pantomime.

"Elizabeth?" Sir Geoffrey knocked on the door.

"Come in, Granddad."

Sir Geoffrey entered and stopped at the sight. "My Lord. Elizabeth - come here for a second, would you?" He held out a hand to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth left the window and joined him by the mirror.

"Look, my dear." He smiled proudly. "How lovely you look."

Elizabeth, feeling a little strange, followed his gaze. She looked like another woman entirely, dressed in a dark green gown gathered close at the waist and fringed with white muslin, low-cut and nearly off the shoulders to reveal a generous bosom. Her hair fell loose and unbound around her face in two straight golden waves. The events of the previous evening had drawn some of the color from her face, turning it paler and her lips redder. The latter parted slightly in surprise at the effect the dress had on her beauty.

"Oh Elizabeth…" Sir Geoffrey drew away from her, as she slowly realized he was crying.

"Granddad! What's the matter?"

"My dear, I… you mean so much to me-you do know that?"

"Granddad…" Elizabeth took her grandfather by his shoulders and looked into his teary eyes. "Of course I know that."

Sir Geoffrey nodded. "Thank you." He rubbed his eyes. "Do you know your part?"

"I think so. It seems pretty straightforward."

A throng of milling villagefolk filled the east garden an hour later, generating a quiet buzz of conversation, most of which Elizabeth failed to follow, so preoccupied had she been with her dream of the night before.

"I thought it was crap, anyway," Nick Crossley, a squat, slightly overfed youth with hipster Buddy Holly specs and a Starsailor t-shirt he

wore beneath his jerkin, as he'd shown her. "It's criminal, having to pay that much for a film nowadays."

"Yes, I didn't like it very much, either." Elizabeth tenderly edged away towards the vicar, who smiled in acknowledgment.

"Miss Houghton, you look the very *picture* of Margaret Carthorpe!" The vicar clapped his hands with the trademark zeal of the local antiquarian. "I don't think we'll have ever seen a more realistic fete than this year's!"

"Thank you, vicar."

The vicar mistook her preoccupation for fascination and forged ahead accordingly. "such a vision of loveliness, beset by evil forces, awaiting the paladin's rescue… such a classic story. It's unfortunate you won't be in the audience yourself, Miss Houghton. A *wonderful* spectacle!" The vicar seemed to tire and sped off.

Elizabeth separated from the throng and walked along the hedge for a little, looking at the fens and through them across the pasture. She felt a chill in the air, as if cold hands gripped her bones in the sunlight.

"Miss Elizabeth?" Jenkins came up alongside her almost undetected. His face was flushed from the unusual exertion of attending to thirty or forty people.

"Oh, hello, Jenkins. Um… are you all right?"

"A little tired, I'm afraid. Is there anything you need?"

"No, Jenkins, I'm fine." She smiled at him. "Don't *work* so hard."

"I'll try not to, Miss Elizabeth." Jenkins moved off, leaving her to her thoughts.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" The vicar had been enlisted as the de facto master of ceremonies by Sir Geoffrey, as the latter didn't feel quite up to the task. It was a logical deduction, given the vicar's sometimes intense love of the material. His own stints as the noble Edward Houghton had been among the high points of his secluded existence. His wife despaired.

"In the Year of Our Lord 1565, the noble Sir Edward Houghton was at last allowed by Her Gracious Majesty Queen Elizabeth the First to return to his homeland. Cast out for unrepentant adherence to the Roman Catholic faith, he had taken service with the forces of Venice in far-off Cyprus, wielding his sword against the might of the Ottoman Empire. The pull of these green pastures, fortunately, coupled with the queen's mercy, proved too strong for him, and he returned seeking a new life among the old forests and rivers of his native land.

"All, however, was not well." The vicar played his audience like a fiddle, or tried.

Elizabeth and Nick stood behind the curtain, Elizabeth beginning to

feel a little foolish in her period dress.

"This is my first time, you know," Nick told Elizabeth. "You know, as Sir Edward."

"Mine, too." Elizabeth gave him a wan smile. "As Lady Carthorpe, not Sir Edward."

"Right, I got it." Nick scratched at his forehead.

"Are you all right… Nick?"

"Yeah. I'm just nervous."

"Me, too. It won't be long now."

"The county, remote from the centers of civilization since the time of Arthur, was beset by an evil presence - a sorcerous necromancer, the notorious Henry Burlinson! A dark, treacherous villain, educated in the darkest of dark arts in the secret magical seminaries of Spain! Returned to England to wreak vengeance on the godly who cast him out! Foully enthroned in the Ramble Fens, he tyrannized the countryside with sinister outlawry, against a suffering populace crying for order to be restored!"

"Oh, shit, this is me," said Nick, composing himself to enter scene.

From beyond the hedges, the Brierley Day fete looked small and forlorn, a faded watercolor. Nick strode onto the stage, his uncertain steps giving the lie to his armor and sword. The robed, twirly-mustached figure playing Burlinson-Ken Brewer, who'd made the huge mistake of not staying in Bristol when his mum had phoned and said "I'll never speak to you again if you don't show up for Brierley Day this year"- stood at the end of the stage, trying to look both sinister and somehow attractive at the same time. Mettleford's inhabitants looked on from their tables, with a mixture of polite interest and civic duty.

Another watched from behind the hedges, one who'd waited a long time for this day, who'd never been given the chance to live a normal life, as had all the others present. He hid himself between the hedge and a clump of oaks, and watched the interplay between "Sir Edward" and "Burlinson" with disdain.

"My lands… my heart… are yours upon your victory." Elizabeth pronounced the words slowly, haltingly, willing herself not to laugh as she gave Nick the perfunctory curtsey required by the script. Everyone in the audience looked so *solemn* in their nice weekend clothes.

A black-clad figure rose behind the hedges, like a cobra.

Elizabeth froze, ice coursing through her veins. It stood tall and erect, bent slightly forward. No one else could see it, no one turned to see it. All eyes stayed on the stage. She wanted to scream, but all that came out was an "mm" noise against the dry roof of her mouth. She shut her eyes, wishing she were asleep.

When she opened them, the figure had vanished. Nick jostled her as he engaged in his pantomime combat with Ken Brewer, giving her an odd stare in the process as she should have been further offstage. Elizabeth noticed the mystified looks from some, and moved beyond the curtains, her mind dwelling on the mysterious figure and its disturbing presence at Brierley.

"Elizabeth, my dear, you did very well.," Sir Geoffrey reassured her after the play. "Very well, indeed." The main hall had filled with people enjoying aperitifs, chatting over the little things that ever bedeviled a village like Mettleford. "You survived, after all."

"Yeah." Elizabeth felt like giggling. Unbeknownst to Sir Geoffrey, she had managed to knock back a little brandy after the shot, ministered by an understanding if agitated Jenkins. He'd mentioned something about his mother not feeling well and hurried off. She wondered if she should tell her grandfather about the stranger. Was she seeing things?

"Are you all right?" Sir Geoffrey looked unusually intent, taking her gently by the shoulder.

"Yeah, Granddad. Sure. I'm all right." She stared off into the distance, feeling queasy.

"Perhaps you should lie down." He winked at her. "I can make my excuses to our guests."

"Granddad…" She meant to refuse but then thought better of it. "Thank you."

As Elizabeth neared her bedroom door, she felt a sudden sensation of being watched. Whirling around, she saw nothing but the long, bare upper hall flanked with stern portraits.

"Is anybody there?" she asked in a voice that seemed to her to have grown very small in a very short time. "Jenkins?" No one responded. The sounds from downstairs, the polite din of conversation stretched tight in her ears as she leaned into the door, suddenly very warm. She wiped her brow and forced the door open, collapsing back against it as it closed. She locked it behind her, not wishing to be disturbed.

She fell onto the bed, struggling to remove her dress. It was burning-she could hardly breathe. Had she taken too much to drink? It was only a glass of brandy-or two. She beheld the window overlooking the fens upside down, seeing it from her vantage point sprawled across the covers. The mysterious figure from earlier hung outside against the windowpanes like a bat or an unusually agile rat. Elizabeth, in the throes of some curious happiness, giggled at the sight. She could tell, too, that the figure giggled with her.

"Who's there?" she asked, breathless with an inexplicable excitement as someone gently shook her awake.

"You need to get up, Elizabeth," announced her grandfather. "We… must go."

Elizabeth opened her eyes towards the window and saw the black-clad figure standing by her bed, just as he had in her earlier dream. She felt giddy and dizzy, but still a tinge of dread shaded her mood. Suddenly, the dream returned in full force, knifing through the strange haze that clouded her mind. The man was terrible, she knew, and she instantly realized she was in the presence of evil. She shrunk away from him only to find herself encircled by the powerful grip of some unseen captor.

"Allow me to introduce myself, my dear Miss Houghton," intoned the figure in a nasal yet sinister tenor. "I am Henry Burlinson."

Elizabeth saw that Jenkins held her and started to scream as he dragged her from the bed and out the door into the hall. Fighting with all her might, she managed to get his arm halfway off before she bit him on the hand and fell from his opened grasp. Half-mad with fear, she galloped madly down the staircase, tripping over the next to last step and landing in a heap on the floor.

Burlinson followed, crouching down and lifting her in his arms.

"Ah my dear, I suppose it is a pity. You're far too dainty a morsel to waste like this, but… rules are rules. Tradition is tradition. Family… is… family."

Elizabeth tried to claw at his shrouded face.

"Granddad!" she screamed. "Granddad!!"

Sir Geoffrey appeared next to the staircase, a look of incredible sadness on his face.

"Your grandfather has contracted a bargain, my dear." Burlinson tossed her over to Jenkins and stretched an arm along the staircase banister.

"To preserve the family line," explained Sir Geoffrey in a stiff, formal tone Elizabeth could tell was close to cracking.

"A bargain with Burlinson," Burlinson trilled in a singsong voice making him sound like a clown on a children's program. "Jenkins." He waved his hand airily as Jenkins pulled Elizabeth towards the cellar doors.

"It really is easier this way, Miss Elizabeth," Jenkins stammered as he half-dragged, half-carried her into the cellar, almost as if he was trying to convince himself.

"I awoke two years ago, two years before the ripening of a curse I lay on your house as I fell under the blade of your illustrious ancestor. The curse predicted the destruction of the latest generation of issue four hun-

dred years from the union between Edward Houghton and Lady Margaret Carthorpe."

Jenkins fastened the struggling Elizabeth to an old, ornately carved, red-backed chair.

"I could not avoid returning to the scene of the crime, as it were-this house-and made your grandfather's acquaintance. Considerably surprised to discover I was alive, he was more than willing to believe in the existence and power of my curse." He turned to Sir Geoffrey. Elizabeth couldn't see his eyes, but she recognized gloating even in the midst of her fear.

"He cares about your family, Elizabeth, cares very deeply. He cares so much he's willing to make the ultimate sacrifice. The wording of my original curse was sufficiently vague to leave the nature of the generational death open-whether it was one or many. There were only two in this case, and only one, in the old way of things, to carry on the line, carry on the name - *you*.

"You see… Elizabeth - I may call you that, yes? You see… my power grows inch by inch as the auspicious moment arrives, one little joke of the fates to torture me further. Another is the nature of the curses devised by my teachers. Like a fine wine or cheese, a truly great curse has its own secret trademark, the sign of its maker. In the case of my own vintage, this was to add two years onto every family damnation of this nature. I was preserved for the four hundred years through a terrible spell meant only for the direst of emergencies. Due to my infernal haste, I forgot the most ancient quirks of the Saragossa School and found myself condemned to two years further as a wandering *husk*!!" His voice rose to a raspy shriek on the last word.

Elizabeth squirmed in the chair. "Granddad!" she screamed, even realizing it was useless. "Help!"

Henry Burlinson threw back his cowl and removed his mask, revealing a visage that must have crawled its way up from the furthest reaches of hell, the pasty grey skin of dead fish stretched tight across a cruelly angular skull, around a scythelike nose that seemed to curve underneath. Elizabeth too little notice of these horrors, her attention monopolized by the pair of gleaming green eyes that took her soul and grasped it in bony, inhumanly strong clutches, as Burlinson now did to her arms, cutting into her bare flesh with razor-sharp nails.

Elizabeth wept in terror as her last hope that the whole thing was another vivid nightmare faded. She tried and failed to shrink from Burlinson's hulking, appalling presence.

"I need the latest generation of the usurper's family, their youth and innocence, or I shall remain immortal yet decaying, eventually a shivering waste of matter, alive only in name. Your presence at these insolent

festivities has fulfilled the curse and made my dream… real." Burlinson leered at her, rubbing his leg against hers. "The prophecy, the incantations, the fine print that exist all say I must wait until midnight, but… but…" Burlinson's expression softened as he looked into her eyes with a foul, violate tenderness, stroking her disheveled hair and her tear-stained cheeks. "I cannot hold!!" He began to shake uncontrollably.

His frenzy finally terrified Elizabeth beyond reason as she began to scream hysterically. Her shrieks restored Burlinson's equilibrium. The necromancer started laughing in childish glee as he drank in her fear like the Madeira he had always loved.

"I will live!" he howled. "I will live!!" He pounced on Elizabeth as he did squirrels in the forest and kissed her hard on the mouth, muffling her screams. Elizabeth struggled but found him too powerful, despite his four hundred years in exile. Her mind screamed in unison with her throat as Burlinson wilted her voice with his tongue. Despite her best efforts, she began to weaken as the nerves seemed to leach away in contact with his sickening touch. Her fear-maddened sobs evaporated as she went limp in Burlinson's arms, her head lolling back and her hair brushing the back of the chair.

She thought she was dying.

Sir Geoffrey, rigid with duty and shame, watched his family's ancient enemy kiss his favorite grandchild and ecstatically shudder in an obscene embrace of her youth.

Despite the bargain he had contracted, Sir Geoffrey's fist clenched unbidden as he expected Burlinson to turn to him with a gloating leer of triumph and say something contemptuously witty.

Burlinson released Elizabeth's lifeless form, letting it sag into the chair as he rose and clutched his chest, as if shot or stabbed. He shook in several spasmodic jerks, staggering back towards the entrance with his hands to his head.

Sir Geoffrey watched in silence. The family's salvation complete, the rest of his life meant nothing. He could think of nothing that mattered.

Burlinson flung himself on the ground, shaking and screaming for some time as if in an epileptic fit. At last, he rose and stood erect for a minute, looking down on Elizabeth and humming something softly.

He began to laugh, a loud, hearty guffaw that filled the room with sickening bonhomie. He turned and shattered Sir Geoffrey's sangfroid. A hale, hearty young man of maybe twenty-five, he held up his hands, no longer wrinkled and bony but vital and strong, displaying them for himself as much as for Sir Geoffrey. His eyes had become a startling blue, closing for a second as he tossed back the cowl with his head, now covered by thick brown hair.

"I live," he exclaimed in a joyful sob.

Sir Geoffrey shut his eyes and struggled unsuccessfully to produce tears. Sadness, joy, everything else had died within him, leaving him the walking dead.

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ABANDON ALL HOPE
YEE WHO ENTER !

BENEATH YOU

by Albie Swain

There are cracks between the floorboards of the café, wide enough to lose a large coin down, sideways on. They are a constant wonder to me, and I always spend a few minutes each day, sipping hot sweet tea and mopping up egg yolk with a chunk of bread, watching the lights flash through the gaps…

…and hearing the screams of joy as the ghost trains rattle by beneath.

Only if you get down on your hands and knees will you catch a glimpse of a terrified face, a grasping hand. But that would be rude, to steal terror and enthralment from someone else's train ticket, so to speak. I was brought up to respect things like that, as no doubt you were. Another man's fear is his own business. If you are lucky, as I and my fellow café friends are, you may find a place such as this, where the floorboards don't meet, or the walls are too thin.

Then, and only then, is it correct to share another person's yells of terror, as they plummet from some skeleton infested precipice, into God knows what kind of blackness.

Not that my envy is a dark one. They deserve their particular mode of transport, according to the sum of their worldly goods. I myself, as you know, am merely a retired librarian with a pittance of a pension to get by on. I can just about afford a meal at the café every day, and a few hours of TV before I go to bed. Nope, no subterranean ghost rides for me, I'm sorry to say. No dangling, heavy cobwebs, no coffins expelling their inhabitants. Oh, well, eh?

At least I have my bus pass.

It's a fair old distance away is my home by the industrial lake. I used to walk it in half an hour, when I was a young man, free of school and my family. Savouring the empty stinking shells of houses and the dark trickling ditches breaking through scraggy gardens. Walking the streets gave you a taste for better things. I was aware even as a tiny child, wandering alone through litter clad alleyways and crossing rusting walkways, that something bigger was going on, somewhere else. Unseen.

Aye, that was when I was young and fit. Can't expect to stay young and fit forever, can you. And besides, the buses, although not in the same league as the ghost trains, do at least attempt to stir up a bit of fun for us. A sudden detour past the asylum on dark winters nights. The occasional lump of rotting meat left inside a flat cap or stuck to a seat. One day the driver let on a gang of youths dressed as ghosts and they

performed all manner of strange deeds under their sheets. It's not much, but it helps.

It's very much appreciated.

For some of us, though, it's just not enough. Not all the time. Some just can't take not knowing, you see. They have to know, even if it means breaking into the train tunnels and…well, the rest is hearsay. There's always someone with a story to tell. People cut down by speeding trains, trains full of screaming faces. Others captured by the ones who run the trains…and provide the entertainment. All rumours, you have to understand. No real evidence.

Those that listen to rumour tend to fair better, and go to live in the old factories, swimming about in brown pools, running naked through dark corridors, in the hope that enthralment shall fill their hearts and then they shall have their own eternal ghost train. I can see them during the day, dressed as god knows what, standing about waiting for night. And at night I can only hear them, their echoing screams as they search through darkness for something that will always elude them.

I know, because I've searched too.

Sometimes, when I'm at peace, sat in the café, mopping up egg yolk with a chunk of bread, I'm almost convinced that my search has come to an end.

And then the trains come rushing beneath.

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EDWARD

by Christopher Wood

"*What* are you doing?"

"Look, I'll just be a second, okay?"

Sindy sat back in her seat and folded her arms, her face like thunder. This holiday was turning out to be a lot less than she'd expected. For one thing, it was pissing it down outside. What with the sound of the rain hammering against the roof, the squeak of the wipers pulling their way across the windscreen and the incessant beep of the "door open" alarm, she was almost tempted to put the French radio back on. Tempted, but not that much. The part of the Loire Valley they were in seemed to specialise in radio stations for the middle aged – they hadn't been able to pick anything up that played modern music since they passed Orleans. What's more, putting the radio on would probably only kick-start another argument. After all, it was her who'd forgotten to pack the CDs that might have made this lengthy trip bearable. As Kevin kept reminding her every time some trad jazz or unremarkable classical stuff started up.

She put her feet up onto the dashboard and wiggled her toes, checking the nails to see if any of the varnish had chipped. She could do this because she hadn't been expecting rain in mid France during June, and because of this had only packed a variety of inappropriate footwear – like the fancy flip-flops she was wearing now. If she'd known that the weather in France could actually be worse than that in Birmingham, she'd have packed her fucking galoshes. No, scratch that – she'd have been more forceful in her wishes to go to Ibiza this year. They'd only been in la belle France for two days, and already it was proving to be a wash-out.

The back door opened.

"What the bloody hell is that?"

"Cool, isn't it?"

"If by 'cool' you mean 'shit', then yes, it is."

Grunting with exertion, Kevin appeared to be trying to achieve some kind of magic trick on the back seat. He was shoving a large, wet, painted piece of wood into the car.

"It's not going to fit."

"Yes it is, don't worry."

"I'm not worrying, I'm just stating a fact. It must be six foot long, it won't fit."

"Yes… it…" with one last shove, Kevin appeared to achieve the impossible. "Will! Ta-daa!"

"No-one's impressed, dear."

Completely underwhelmed, Sindy went back to her cuticle examination, turning her attention to her beautifully manicured fingers. Slamming the back door in triumph, Kevin leapt back into the driver's seat, taking the opportunity to kiss her on the cheek.

"Urgh! Gerroff – you're soaking!"

Her husband had a big grin on his face as he re-started the car and pulled back onto the road. "It's great though, isn't it?"

"It's a big piece of wood. We're supposed to be on holiday, why have you picked up a big piece of wet wood off the side of the road?"

Kevin looked like a child on Christmas morning, full of the kind of boyish glee that had attracted Sindy to the gawky 21-year-old six years ago. Six years, she thought, was a bit too long to be living on a factory wage and a now-unhealthy teenage enthusiasm. Most people reached an age when they grew up and started taking life seriously. Most people, but not her Kevin. And it was getting a bit wearing.

"It's not just a piece of wood – it's one of them."

"What?"

"Them – those things we've been seeing all week while we've been driving around. Them… shadow things. The advertising boards. Them!"

He was waving his hand at a black blur which had just whooshed past his side window. It was indistinct through the rain on the glass, but Sindy knew what it was anyway. Kevin hadn't stopped going on about them all week, and he was right, they did seem to be everywhere. In fact, here was another one coming up, illuminated in their headlights. A life-sized cut-out of a human figure, painted jet black, with a red zig-zag reaching from the top of its head down to where the nose would be. Standing, silently, like a 2D hitchhiker waiting for a ride that would never come.

Every one was exactly the same. Most of them were standing alone, but occasionally there were two or three of them placed in the same spot. On the drive down to their camp site they hadn't seen any until they'd hit Orleans. At first she'd been as intrigued as Kevin, but familiarity had bred boredom. Kevin, however, was obsessed. Unfortunately, none of the English-speaking people they'd asked about them had a clue what they were, and neither Kevin or Sindy had any desire to interact with anyone *French* whilst on holiday in France, if they could avoid it. Both had failed their GCSE in that particular language a long time ago.

"It's going to look so cool in our lounge."

"Erm, where?"

Sensing danger, Kevin back pedalled. "Or… in my shed. Somewhere. We'll discuss it later."

Sindy crossed her arms and stared intently out of her window at the trees and rain. Too bloody right they'd discuss it. She had already decided that there was no way the lump of wood was even making it as far back

as the ferry, let alone their semi in Railsback Road. But it wasn't worth telling Kevin that just yet – she wanted to enjoy the holiday. She could put up with the dirty thing in their hardly-spotless caravan for the next week or so, and then she'd accidentally-on-purpose snap the head off. Or just put on her best whiny voice until he capitulated. Or, if it came to it, simply remind her husband that there was no way he could fit any crates of cheap French lager in the car with that thing taking up all the space. Whatever option she chose, there was no way their new friend was crossing the channel. Through the car window it looked like someone had turned the colour contrast down on the view. The sky was a dark grey, the trees a deep green. Everything was dull, dull, dull. Just like this holiday. Just like her stupid husband. She leaned forward and switched the radio on, and started tapping her long nails on the window in time to the jazz music which had filled the car, knowing Kevin would hate it, and that there was nothing he could do or say if he wanted to keep his acquisition.

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"Shit!"

Kevin had sat bolt upright in bed, throwing the flimsy duvet to one side and exposing both their naked bodies to the chill night air. He had practically shouted the word, the combination of the noise, the motion and the sudden cold bringing Sindy snapping back into consciousness and genuinely terrifying her.

"What? What? What?"

"The dirty fucker! Shit! I wonder how long he's been there for? Bastard! Cover yourself up – he might still be there."

Initial fright was beginning to give way to annoyance. "Kevin, stop swearing. What's the matter? Did you have a bad dream or something?"

But he wasn't answering her. He was out of bed and pulling a pair of jeans on, his pale skinny frame illuminated by the glow from the street lamp some French buffoon had decided to place right by their bedroom window. Trousers on, he glanced at the bed to make sure Sindy had pulled the duvet over herself and fully opened the part-open curtains, staring out into the half-light beyond.

"No-one there. He must've seen me wake up…"

"Or heard you. As must the rest of the camp site. What's going on?"

Kevin sat back down on the bed, which was just about his only option, as there was a gap of roughly six inches between the bed and the wall. She touched his shoulder, and was surprised to find he was shaking quite badly.

"Sorry, Sind… I didn't mean to scare you."

"Well, you are. What's the matter? Did you have a bad dream?"

She thought she was being quite nice, given the shock she'd just had. The points she'd just awarded herself for courage in the face of late-night idiocy would be repaid tenfold over the rest of the holiday, of that she'd no doubt.

Kevin took in a deep breath to calm his nerves. "No, not a dream. I saw someone out there through the window, looking in at us."

Sindy couldn't help suppressing a shiver herself. "Are you sure? But earlier on we were…"

"Exactly."

Another mental note – no more sex until they were back where they could do it on the first floor of a building, where it should be done. Kevin got up, shrugging off her hand.

"I'd better go and see if the creepy sod is still out there."

"No, leave it. He can't see in now if we shut the curtains properly, and we can tell the reps in the morning."

But her husband was adamant, terror giving way to annoyance and a fair amount of male pride. "I'll just make sure there's no-one there."

He made his way round the bed and pushed open the door to the rest of the caravan, padding barefoot down the small corridor and into the tiny kitchen. With one hand on the door handle, he turned and looked into the caravan's living space, which was dimly illuminated by the orange glow coming from the lamp outside.

A silent figure was standing in the corner, regarding him impassively.

"Fucking *hell*!"

Kevin stepped away from the shadowy form, and in the same motion pressed down on the door handle, cancelling the lock. His weight fell against the flimsy plastic and glass door and he suddenly found himself unsupported, falling out of the caravan into the cold night air. His foot tried to find some ground but failed, and he dropped sideways onto damp grass, his knee connecting painfully with the metal steps leading up to the door he'd just vacated.

Winded, he rolled onto his back, his knee beginning to throb and the arm he'd fallen onto numb. The night was silent for a second, apart from the buzz of insects. He looked up into the night sky and noted that the stars looked particularly bright. Then a face filled his vision.

Sindy's.

"What are you doing, you daft sod? Get up!"

She was standing over him wearing one of his t-shirts. Quickly, she pulled him to his feet, ignoring his protestations that he was injured.

"Let's get you inside before anyone sees you. What happened, anyway?"

As she tried to lead him back into the caravan, Kevin remembered why he'd ended up falling out in the first place. But he'd already been

frogmarched up the two steps and into the doorway.

"There was someone inside the caravan…"

"Yeah, der-brain, you and me. Until you fell out, that is. I think you should lay off the French beer if it's going to give you nightmares."

And with that she flicked on the light, illuminating the whole of the interior. His eyes adjusting to the sudden change, Kevin winced when he saw that the person was still standing in the corner. Then relaxed.

"Ah, bloody hell."

Standing in the exact place where he'd left it was the wooden figure he'd picked up earlier that day.

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"And you say this person was looking through your window?"

"That's right."

Johann the Club Euro rep raised an eyebrow, and continued in his immaculate English.

"How do you know this when you were asleep? Perhaps you weren't asleep?"

"I was asleep, and then something woke me up." Kevin thought for a moment about Johann's last question. "Hang on, what do you mean by -"

Sindy cut him dead. "I think what Johann meant, Kev," she took the opportunity to cast her eyes over the German teenager's sporty frame. There weren't many people who could carry off a pink and yellow t-shirt and cut-off jeans with so much casual aplomb. The chiselled features and sun-bleached curls didn't hurt, either. "Was that perhaps you had a bad dream? Like, perhaps there was no-one there at all?"

"Your lady could be right, you know." Johann now took the opportunity to check out the English moaner's sexy wife. She had hoisted her petite frame onto a work surface in the kitchen, and was chewing a piece of gum and swinging one of her legs backwards and forwards so that the heel of her bare foot tapped against the front of the fridge beneath her. She was wearing a pale pink vest and a light blue short skirt, with a matching plastic flower in her hair. Too much make-up, he thought, but not bad for an English fraulein. That voice would drive him nuts, though.

"Look, I will ask around and we will keep an eye out for strangers, or people moving around when they should not be. That is all I can do at the moment."

He was now addressing Sindy only, making unwavering eye contact with her.

"After all, we do not want to cause an undue panic, do we? People are here to enjoy their holidays, not worry about peeping Thomases."

He turned to leave, casting an eye over the rest of the caravan.

"Other than that, is everything else fine? Have you had any more ants in your fridge, or… what is that?" He'd noticed the wooden figure propped in the far corner by the window. Sindy noted that the thing looked even more tatty in the bright morning sun that it had piss-wet through the night before. Kevin, glad to have the floor again, walked over to his acquisition and put a friendly arm round its shoulders.

"He's great, isn't he? We call him Edward."

Johann raised his eyebrow again.

"Edward?"

"Yeah," said Kevin, warming up. "Cos his ead's made of wood. Get it? Ed-wood. You know, like Edward Woodward. Why's he got so many d's in his name? Cos if he didn't he'd be E-war-woo-war!"

"I see. I shall be going now. If you need anything else, just be asking."

With a nonplussed look on his face, and shaking his head slightly, Johann left the caravan, jumped on his bicycle and rode off, Sindy watching the muscles in his bare brown legs as he pumped the pedals. There was silence for a second, then Kevin spoke.

"Fat chance of anything being done about *that*. He's gone back to the pool to chat up the teenagers. You know, it wouldn't surprise me if it wasn't him looking through the window last night, I think he's got a bit of a crush on you."

Chance would be a fine thing, thought Sindy, watching the dust created by Johann's passing settle back onto the dirt track.

"Come on, it's hot and dry outside. Let's make the bloody most of it."

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They had been walking through the site for about ten minutes when Kevin suddenly stopped and looked back down the gravel path they'd been following.

Sindy stopped too and regarded him suspiciously, hands on her hips. He couldn't see her eyes behind the pearlescent sunglasses she was wearing, but he knew she wasn't happy.

"Kev-in, will you stop pissing about. We're supposed to be on holiday, not some kind of covert operation. What's the matter, were you hoping to spot some perv in a raincoat?"

Kevin continued scanning the middle distance. "Well, you never know."

"In this heat?" Sindy gestured with her hand at the air which surrounded them, which Kevin had to agree, was pretty warm. The sun was high overhead, suspended in a deep blue sky. And, in a marked contrast to the rest of the holiday, there wasn't a cloud to be seen. He could feel the skin

on his forehead burning. At least he'd go home with some colour, even if it was salmon pink. Sindy, as ever, looked cool and calm in her vest and floaty skirt, her already sunbed-tanned arms and legs developing an even richer glow. Plus, she'd worn a hat for the excursion. A wide-brimmed straw one, perfectly setting off her summery outfit. He was wearing a black t-shirt, dark blue shorts and trainers, all of which were busy soaking up as much heat as they could and making him sweat like a pig. Maybe next time he'd take her advice and actually go shopping for some holiday clothes to wear, rather than making do with his poor selection of English summer emergency shorts and the t-shirts he wore to play football in. Even his sunglasses were crap - a pair of Sindy's old ones which were hideously out of fashion, their metal frames and oval lenses much too small for his face. She'd remarked on more than one occasion that they made him look like a Nazi war criminal, but he'd persevered because he couldn't face going into a shop and buying a new pair. For some reason unknown even to himself, he was firmly of the opinion that only ponces bought sunglasses. How the vast majority of the populace who wore them managed to actually obtain them was shrouded in the mysteries of Kevin's usually botched logic.

"Actually, Miss Marple, I thought I saw something. And as far as I know, it's not against the law to take a break when you're walking in 100 degree heat."

"Thought you saw what?"

"I dunno, a shadow or something - a dark shape. Over there."

He pointed back along the track to the lot of caravans they'd passed, about 50 yards away. The white-painted corrugated steel of their walls shimmered in the midday heat haze.

Sindy put her hand up to her mouth in mock terror. "You *saw* someone, *moving around*? On a *caravan park*? Whatever next?"

"There's no need to take the proverbial. There was just something… odd about it, that's all. Whoever it was just seemed to… vanish, when I looked directly at them. I only saw them out of the corner of my eye."

"You're going bloody crackers, you are." She grabbed his hand and pulled him along the track, grunting good-naturedly with faked exertion. "Come on, Poirot, let's get you out of this sun before you fry your brain. I *told* you to wear your hat…"

The caravan park was set in a woodland, each caravan sited in a clearing and surrounded by assortments of tall trees that were mainly branchless until about 15 feet up their trunks, giving patches of shade but allowing each holiday home to have its share of the sun. As the couple walked on away from the caravan area, the trees became more natural and thickly foliated, until the path they were on was cast deep in shadow, with only the occasional ray of light dappling the ground. Sindy had grabbed

Kevins arm and was resting her head on his upper arm as they walked. "This is nice, isn't it? It's the first time we've been able to explore the place properly since we arrived. I think that if we carry on, we'll come to that beach we saw in the brochure. That'd be nice, won't it, Kev? Kev?"

Kevin, who had been lost in his thoughts, grunted in agreement to whatever his wife had just said. He couldn't shake a feeling of unease. There had been something peculiar about the thing he had seen out of the corner of his eye. It had been so dark, even in this bright sunlight. Then, when he'd focussed on it, it had vanished. Perhaps Sindy was right, perhaps he had had too much sun. He wasn't as used to it as she was, with her sunbeds twice a week. Plus he'd got paler, freckly skin and lighter hair, so it stood to reason that he wouldn't be able to take too much. They'd only been out in it for a quarter of an hour, though. And now, as they walked through the darker, cooler air of the forest, he still had that feeling that something was moving along with them, just out of his eyeline. Something dark and menacing, weaving through the shadows cast by the trees, keeping step with them but always just slightly behind. It stood to reason, though, that if they were being followed, or if there was someone out there just beyond sight, he'd be able to hear them as they walked. The ground was covered in plants and twigs, all of it dry and brittle. But the only sound came from their shoes as they crunched on the dusty gravel of the path. All around them was deathly silent.

He decided to focus on the path straight ahead, which snaked away to the left and began to rise. Sindy was still chirruping away next to him, oblivious to his worries. "…and I was thinking, it'd be a nice place to bring a kid, wouldn't it, Kev? A little Kevin or Sindy, running along in front of us? What do you think?"

"There's someone up ahead."

He said it quietly, because he didn't want the person up ahead to hear him. Sindy squinted and looked up the path. He was right - just at the point where the path bent away to the left there *did* appear to be someone standing in the shadows. But it was difficult to make them out - they were still quite far away and the sunlight was streaming through a gap in the canopy straight onto the path half way between them and the figure, the glare from the white stone chippings almost blinding in its intensity.

"You're right, but so what?"

"Well, nothing. Just thought I'd mention it, that's all."

Kevin feigned nonchalance as they kept walking towards the bend in the path. For some reason, he was getting scared. The figure appeared to be dressed from head to toe in black, which seemed odd, until he realised that apart from the pasty legs sticking out of the bottom of his shorts, he was too. The figure was still to far away to see properly, but it appeared to be wearing a hood of some kind, most of its face cast in shadow, apart

from the lower jaw which glowed white in the sun. But it was difficult to tell - it could have been a man wearing a hat, or anything, really. His mind was telling him to stop and turn around, but his legs kept walking. Walking towards the figure. Next to him, Sindy was making a big show of leaning forward for a better look and shading her eyes with her hand. "You know, Kev, I'm not sure it is a person. I think it might be a shadow, or a tree trunk or something."

They walked into the patch of brilliant sunlight, and for a second both were blinded by the intensity of the rays, despite their sunglasses. When they walked back into the shadows, now only yards from the bend, Kevin looked again. But there was no-one there.

"See?" said Sindy. "Must've been the way the sun was shining on these trees or something. There's no-one here."

Kevin didn't say anything. He was sure he'd seen someone, but he couldn't have done - they couldn't have moved away so quickly. There was also nothing that even remotely resembled a person anywhere up ahead, nothing to cast a shadow or be mistaken for a cowled figure - just a patch of empty ground and beyond, more trees.

Sindy once more broke into his thoughts. "You see! I was right!" Whooping with joy she ran up the slight incline, where the path petered out into sand and the dark green canopy of trees almost miraculously disappeared into a haze of brilliant sunshine. "The beach! The beach! The beach! Yay!"

All thoughts of weird figures vanishing as he moved out of the oppressive woodland, Kevin jogged after her. "Calm down, love," he shouted, adding under his breath, "it's just an old sand quarry…"

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Despite it being "an old sand quarry", Kevin couldn't help but enjoy himself. A raft had been anchored in the centre of the lake, and following a spate of hole digging and sandcastle building (aided by a collection of abandoned plastic spades and buckets found in the grassland where the beach bordered the woodland), he left Sindy sunbathing on the icing sugar sand while he made it his mission to swim to and explore the wooden artefact. The water was cool, but not icy cold, and it wasn't until he'd swum half way that he realised just how far out the raft was, and how long it had been since he'd swam such a distance. Grunting with exertion, he finally managed to haul himself onto its smooth planks, which were boiling hot under the early afternoon sun. He stood up, water cascading off his big baggy shorts, and jumped up and down to catch Sindy's attention, waving his arms and yelling. She gave him a demure wave back and then lay back down again, pulling her hat over her eyes

as she did so.

Unbelievably, they had the sand, and the lake, to themselves. There wasn't a soul to be seen. Despite his earlier moans about the history of the "beach", Kevin had to admit to himself that it was impressive - a mini man-made paradise slap in the middle of France. From his vantage point he could see all around the lake. It was oval-shaped. At its furthest point from him was a modern-looking large wooden building which was probably something to do with the camp site. Further round he could see white specks between the trees which must have been more caravans. But the main thing he could see was trees - a dark green belt between the blue of the lake and the lighter blue of the sky. Occasionally there were more patches of brilliant white sand abutting the water, but mainly the trees came right up to the edge. They could have been a thousand miles from civilisation, not making the best of a second-rate family camp site scant miles from a boring French town.

He realised there wasn't a great deal to do on the raft, especially without an audience. He did a bomb into the water, got back on and did a star jump off, but the novelty was wearing off fast. When he looked around again, he saw that people were beginning to arrive - distant dots of colour that signified families were beginning to set up camp on the beaches, others were wandering along pathways which surrounded the water.

Reasoning that this meant he wouldn't be alone on the raft for much longer, he waved at Sindy to announce his imminent return. She was either ignoring him, or asleep, at this distance he couldn't tell. Her bit of the beach was still unclaimed by anyone else - the sparsity of the number of sun seekers meaning that people could spread out across the beach and respect each others' space. On the off chance, Kevin shielded his eyes and tried to spot any topless girls amongst the 20 or so distant dots, knowing it was unlikely there would be, and even more unlikely that he'd be able to see much even if there were. Then he spotted something which caused a chill to run through him, despite the boiling heat. Standing where the wood met the beach, partially obscured by shadow, he was sure he could see a man dressed head to foot in black. The figure - if it was a figure, and not just a trick of the light or a strangely shaped tree trunk, appeared to be staring straight back at him. Its face - if it was a face - was pale, almost white under the brilliant sun. It was a good hundred yards from Sindy's prone form, but at the moment there were no other figures anywhere near it, or Sindy. Why the presence of a solitary person on a beach was causing him such unease, Kevin couldn't say. Perhaps the sight of the peeper the night before had freaked him out more than he cared to admit. Despite knowing it was stupid, that once again there would be a perfectly reasonable explanation for what he (thought he) was seeing, Kevin started to call out to Sindy. But at this range it was hopeless, and he could hear the

shouts and screams of children playing on the waters edge drifting over the still surface of the pool, noises that would easily drown out his own calls. Deciding it was better to be safe than sorry, he dived into the water, the sudden coldness knocking his breath away after the warmth of the sun-drenched raft. He started to make his way back to shore using a mixture of front crawl and breast stroke, even now wondering how something he'd loved so much as a child could have become such hard work as an adult. It felt like he was hardly moving forward at all. Weeds were catching at his legs, making the whole process seem much more unpleasant than it had done going *out* to the raft. He looked towards the beach and tried to gauge how far he'd got left to go, but it looked like he really hadn't made any progress. Ignoring the greasy tendrils that were wrapping around his calves, he tried stretching his foot down to see if he could stand on the bottom yet. But there was nothing, and the action of stretching his leg down caused him to lose his buoyancy, his head slipping beneath the surface, eyes still open, mouth gasping for air but getting only liquid. The weeds wrapped around his foot, and Kevin started to panic, fighting to regain the surface before they increased their hold. Coughing and spluttering, his eyes streaming, be broke the surface again, kicking his legs frantically to free them. He looked around to try and regain his bearings. He was facing the raft, which was bobbing quite gently just ten or so metres away. Spinning round, his waterlogged eyes could just make out his wife, still lying on the beach, oblivious to his problems. He looked towards where the figure had been. It had gone.

But then he saw something - his eyes were still streaming and his vision was blurred, and at first he thought it must be a large bird. But when he looked again he saw it was too big to be a bird, it looked like a large piece of black material, caught on a breeze, blowing along the path that separated the beach from the wood. It was difficult to make out because it kept changing shape as it bowled along, but one thing was clear - it was moving from where the figure had been standing, towards Sindy. With an ungainly splash, Kevin struck out for the shore again.

He kept his head down this time, hardly daring to look, the alien feeling of being in dingy, weed-filled water (what had ever possessed him to dive in?) stoking his unreasonable fears about Sindy's safety, and helping push him to get out of the water as quickly as possible. His feet touched bottom and he half-ran, half staggered, towards where his wife had been lying. Where she was still lying.

"What's the matter with *you*? See a shark, or something?"

For once, Kevin was speechless, knowing that whatever he said would sound stupid, all his fears ebbing away as he felt sand beneath his feet and hot sun on his back. But even though he was already getting embarrassed with himself about his feelings from only seconds before, he

still noticed that there was no wind on the beach. Not even the slightest of breezes.

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What was that? A noise? Something had woken him up. But now there was silence. Kevin opened his eyes and looked up at the ceiling. Weird, he felt wide awake. It was still the middle of the night, the only light was the orange glow from that bloody street lamp, which was illuminating the room even though the thin curtains had been fully drawn. Sindy was still fast asleep, he could hear her breathing. They weren't touching, but he could feel the heat coming off her body. Kevin shifted slightly, realising that his right arm had developed pins and needles. In doing so, his field of vision altered so that he was looking diagonally across the room over Sindy's shoulder. It took his mind a heartbeat to process what his eyes were seeing, and a could sweat broke across his scalp. They weren't alone in the room. The silhouette of a man was standing at the far corner of the bed.

Kevin froze. He'd read about people's blood turning to ice and their hair standing on end, but this was the first time anything approaching it had happened to him. He blinked to see if he was dreaming. When he opened his eyes, the figure was still there. There wasn't enough light to reveal any features - it was just a dark shape in the corner of the room. But it was a dark man-shaped shape. Not moving, regarding him impassively. Kevin felt paralysed with fear. But then he remembered Sindy, unaware of the intruder, sleeping next to him. He had to protect her. He had to give it a go, anyway.

He sat up suddenly, screaming at the top of his voice, at the same time reaching for the light switch he knew was placed on the wall somewhere above his right shoulder. Hoping that the combination of sudden light, sound and noise would put the intruder on the back foot and give him the chance to do… something, he wasn't sure what. The light came on, dazzling him momentarily. Sindy visibly jumped next to him, her hand going to her forehead as she tried to make sense of the sudden jolt into wakefulness.

"Kev? Kev? What is it?"

Kevin said nothing. He was staring into the corner of the room. There was nothing there. Not even a discarded coat or something that could have cast a man-shaped shadow. Nothing at all.

***

It was bloody raining again. The sound of droplets tap-dancing on the

metal roof of the caravan had started about an hour after Kevin's nightmare, and increased in intensity until neither of them could sleep. They lay there awake until the grey light of dawn started to creep into the caravan, and then Sindy got up without saying a word, and made them both a cup of tea. She was fuming. Not just because of her silly bugger of a husband, who appeared to have turned into a bag of nerves over the past two days, but because she'd been abroad for nearly a week and been able to enjoy - count them - one day of decent weather. One bloody day. She'd already polished off the three novels she'd brought with her, and they couldn't even get hold of an English magazine in the camp site. Which left her faced with trying to wade through one of Kevin's spy novels to pass the time, or cards. Again.

They were on their seventh hand of gin rummy when there was a knock at the caravan door. Kevin opened it to reveal Johann, looking soaked despite the cagoule he had draped across his head.

"Do you mind if we are coming in? I have brought a person with me who would like very much to talk about a serious matter with you both."

Kevin stood aside to let Johann in, who, despite the rain, was still in his hot weather ensemble - nasty t-shirt, cut-off jeans and flip-flops. Behind him, a tiny middle-aged woman entered the caravan, covered from head to toe in an outsized red raincoat which obviously belonged to someone else, as it was several sizes too big for her and accentuated her diminutive size. She lowered the hood of the coat as she entered and nodded acknowledgement at Sindy, then, almost grudgingly, it seemed to Kevin, at him. "Madame. Monsieur." The woman looked familiar, and it took a moment for Kevin to place her. Then it came to him - she worked in the site's café, serving pizzas and pommes-frites to British holiday-makers relieved to be able to put at a sign and say "That." rather than wrestle with the intricacies of attempting French. The reason why she looked different was because she wasn't smiling.

"This is Celine," Johann waved at the woman as an introduction. "She works on the site. Her English is not so good as mine, so I have with her come to act as an interpretation."

He took in a breath to carry on, but was stopped as Celine pushed past him and into the caravan's living space, her eyes wide, and focussed on one thing. Kevin's trophy. Edward. She muttered something in French, low and fast. Kevin didn't need an interpretation to know that she wasn't happy. She span round and spat more words, this time directly at Kevin, her voice rising higher in pitch until she was screaming at him. Then she ran at him, tears in her eyes, her hands outstretched, like claws. With a speed and dexterity Kevin didn't know he had, he managed to catch her wrists before the talons could do any harm, but she wriggled and spat in his grasp like an angry tom cat, still shouting at him. Sindy hadn't even

moved, she sat terrified on the sofa. Even the normally implacable Johann looked a little wide-eyed. Kevin just stood there, taking what he could only assume was a fair amount of personal abuse, as the woman continued to try and free herself from his grasp. He was loathe to let go, frightened of the damage she might do to him if he did, and unsure of the proper protocol when attacked by a strange woman half his height who was old enough to be his mother. Belting her one didn't seem to be an option.

Eventually Johann took the decision for him, grabbing her around the upper arms and pinning them to her sides, then hoisting her off her feet and carrying her, forcefully yet carefully, back through the door and outside. The pair stood in the pouring rain, both red-faced with exertion, her shouting at the rep and him responding in low tones. Eventually, after a minute or so, she seemed to calm down. But she stood outside when the German stepped back into the caravan, seemingly oblivious to the rain, staring through the doorway towards where Sindy and Kevin sat in the warm and dry, both ashen-faced. Johann shut the door behind him, but they could still see her tiny, red-clad form through the water racing down the glass. Kevin spoke, or rather shouted, first.

"What the bloody hell was all that about?"

Johann remained standing, water running off the cagoul draped around his shoulders and forming a pool on the linoleum floor around his flip flops. He looked slightly sheepish. "I am dumbstruck. I had no idea she would be reacting like that. I must apologise for her, and for not warning you. You see, just a month ago she lost her son in a car accident. The wounds will take a long time to heal."

Kevin's anger was unabated. "I'm sorry about that, but what's it got to do with us?"

Johann moved over to the corner where the wooden figure stood propped against the curtains. "Nothing as such, but it has quite a lot to do with this."

He looked like he was about to put his hand on the cracked, flaking wood, but seemed to think better of it and his fingers stopped inches short. He put his hand in his trouser pocket instead.

"When you first showed me this, I confess I did not know what it was either. For sure I had seen a few on the roads, but I thought they were just adverts."

Sindy looked at him. "That's what they are, aren't they?"

Johann met her gaze. "No. They are far from being that. This lunchtime, I was talking with the other reps in the café about it. Some of them are from around here, just doing summer jobs. They told me what they are."

Kevin felt that the young German was milking the situation somewhat. "And? What are they?"

"They were put there by the police. They are to mark the sites of bad car accidents, and each figure represents a life lost on the roads."

Kevin sat back on the settee. That explained the woman's reaction. "Ah."

Sindy rounded on him, her voice taking on an angry high-pitched tone he knew only too well. "I knew it! I knew you shouldn't have taken it, you fucking idiot!" She punched him hard on the arm.

"Ow…"

Johann spoke up again, sensing that an argument was brewing and wanting to say his piece and get out before it erupted.

"Celine, she heard what we were talking about, and demanded that I showed her where you were staying, so she could ask you to take the… wooden man… back to where you got it. I am sorry, I had no idea she would react that way. Obviously, she has one of these signs dedicated to her son, and she feels that somewhere a mother is crying, wondering what has happened to her child's… monument. Is that the right word?"

Sndy smiled at him. "Pretty much. Don't worry, Johann, we'll sort it out. Can you tell her that? And tell her my husband is sorry for being so stupid."

Johann smiled at them both, looking relieved. "Ah, it is not stupidity. You just did not know, is all."

Sindy got up and showed Johann out. Kevin stayed where he was sitting on the sofa, rubbing his arm and looking through the glass door at Johann talking to the French woman. Eventually, they left together, Johann with his cagoule lifted above his head and shoulders, the woman seemingly still oblivious to the soaking she was getting, leaving her hood down, water pouring down her face, masking her tears. Kevin turned to watch as they made their way around the caravan to the main path. At the last moment before they disappeared behind the hedge which separated their pitch from the next one, the woman stopped and looked back, her eyes meeting Kevin's through the glass. They were filled with fury. Then she disappeared.

Kevin shook his head and turned to face Sindy. This was going to be tricky.

***

"You can't possibly still want to take the thing? After *that*?"

"That just makes it even better! Why can't you see that?"

"You're a ghoul!"

"Ah, come on - it's not like I've stolen someone's gravestone…"

"Yes it IS! That's exactly what it's like!"

"It is not! There's no-one buried there, it's not consecrated ground or

anything…"

"Aaaaagh! Look, just get rid of the fucking thing! Take it back! Did you not see how upset that woman was, and it wasn't even her son's! Imagine how the person's family feel!"

"Ah, come on. Look, it's just a plank of wood."

"Exactly. It's just a plank of wood. So put it back where you found it, and get another plank from somewhere - one that isn't connected with dead people! Look, I'll help you paint it, even!"

"It. Would. Not. Be. The. Same."

The argument had been raging for hours, the size of the caravan and the weather outside meaning that neither of them had any place they could retreat to. All it did was go round and round in circles. Sindy, who hadn't been keen on the thing from the start, wanted rid of it. Kevin wouldn't budge on the subject - it was his find, he was keeping it. He was taking it home and that was the end of it. Things hadn't been thrown yet, but it was only a matter of time.

***

In the end, nothing got thrown, but it was dark outside by the time an agreement had been settled. Kevin suggested that they both sleep on the matter, and if Sindy still felt as strongly the next day, he'd do something about it. What he didn't add was that there was no way he was changing his mind, sleep or no sleep. He just couldn't be bothered to argue any more. And it was still raining outside.

***

This time he knew what it was that had woken him up. A roll of thunder, long and low, underneath the incessant sound of the rain on the roof. Kevin hoped the noise wouldn't wake Sindy, she hated storms. Probably not as much as she hated him at the moment, but thunder and lightning was guaranteed to dampen her mood even further.

He opened one eye, half expecting, after his little episodes from the previous nights, to see Frankenstein's monster standing by the bed. But the orange glow from the street lamp didn't appear to be in a shadow-casting mood tonight, the room looked normal. And empty. A flash of lightning put it into stark relief. Still nothing out of the ordinary was revealed. The crack of the lightning connecting with the ground came soon afterwards, signifying that the storm was almost overhead. Surprisingly, Sindy still didn't stir. Another roll of thunder, the rumble seeming to reverberate right across the sky above, almost as if it started from Kevin's left and moved to his right. It was going to be a big one.

That was it, he couldn't sleep now. He might as well go into the living area, open the curtains and enjoy the show. Moving carefully so as not

to wake his slumbering wife, Kevin slid out of bed and tip-toed to the bedroom door, casting a quick look back to see if he'd disturbed her. Another flash from outside lit her up enough for him to see that he hadn't. Blimey, she was out for the count this evening and no mistake. Must have been all that shouting.

The lightning crack sounded even nearer this time. He moved to the side window above the kitchen sink and lifted the curtain to see if anything was visible - blue edged clouds rolling majestically across the sky, like in the films. He was disappointed to see nothing, apart from the ground outside, orange-lit by the lamp. The sky was pitch black. He'd need to go into the living area and open the curtains covering the large bay window if he wanted a really good view. Trying to walk as softly as possible on the cold, plasticy floor, he moved into the living space, casting a cursory glance in Edward's direction as he did so, and remembering the first night after he'd picked it up, and how the sight of it had scared him so. Come to think of it, all the bad dreams had started since then. He smiled to himself. Bloody hell, he was getting as superstitious as Sindy. With all the curtains drawn, it was quite dark in the living area, the only light coming from the side window, the dull orange glow from the street light finding its way in through the gap made when he'd dislodged the curtain to look out. He could just make out the wooden figure through the gloom, it was tilted back at an odd angle to rest against the wall. Only its top half was visible in the glow cast from the window, the shadows claiming everything below the waist. Kevin took a step forward, but something made him stop. Then the room was illuminated by another lightning flash.

The scene remained burned onto Kevin's retinas after darkness returned… the book case, the gas fire, the CD player on the shelf, all where they had left them. And Edward, of course. But it was what Kevin had seen at the feet of the wooden figure that made him whimper in the sudden darkness.

It could have been a discarded towel, or the way the light fell on the floor, but in his heart he knew it wasn't. The thing was coiled around the base of the wooden figure, slumped at its feet as if sleeping there. But whatever it was, it never slept. Not any more. Kevin knew this, as surely as he knew it meant to do him harm. He watched, rooted to the spot, unable to cry out or move away, as a black shape rose up silently in front of him from the floor, its top half becoming visible as it moved up into the glow cast through the window. It reached its full height, which was a good foot taller than Kevin himself, its cowled head brushing the ceiling. Then slowly, and deliberately, the creature which had been stalking him for the past three nights began to turn to face him, the cowl parting to reveal bleached white skin and a single, jet black eye. Thunder grumbled

overhead. Kevin noticed that the rain had stopped beating on the roof of the caravan. The thing continued to turn, revealing more of its parched, featureless face. Kevin wanted to scream, but the sound wouldn't come. It took a step toward him. A smelled reached his nostrils, the sickly aroma of dead flowers mixed with musty cellar air. It rustled as it moved another step towards him, as if the floor of the caravan were covered with dead leaves.

Without warning, the room was filled with a brilliant blue-white light, and a deafening crack shook the entire caravan. Kevin fell backwards onto the floor, the vision of the thing's face seared in his mind as surely as if he'd taken a photograph. He tried to open his eyes, then realised they were already open. The caravan was in complete darkness - no light from outside came through the windows. All the power had gone. He could see nothing in the inky blackness. Tears stinging his eyes, he shuffled backwards until he felt the wall of the caravan against his back. Perhaps… perhaps it had gone, scared off by the sudden light and noise?

Then he heard the rustling again, close by his ear, to his right. Material grazed his cheek, unseen in the darkness. He realised the smell had returned. Something breathed next to him. A bony hand gripped his shoulder, the pressure finally causing him to find a voice and cry out.

"Kev… what's going on? What was that bang?" Sindy's voice, croaky with sleep, calling from the bedroom.

He felt the air move by his face as something whipped past him, going back to where it came from. After a couple of seconds listening, he called back: "Lightning, I think - we've had a power cut."

"Oh."

He heard her turn over in bed and go back to sleep. Amazing. But it was good she wasn't properly awake. He had things to do. He had to make things right. As if on cue, the rain started its tattoo on the roof again.

***

Getting Edward into the back seat had been easier than the first time, although the rain was heavier and Kevin had been completely soaked by the time he'd achieved it. He didn't see the point of changing out of his t-shirt and shorts sleeping combination - in this kind of rain, nothing remained waterproof for long. If he got changed, it would just mean that whatever he put on would end up just as wet. His hands were shaking badly, though, both from the cold and the sheer terror he had just experienced.

Several times during the operation he'd expected to look up and see Sindy watching him from the doorway of the caravan, but she had not stirred. And at least the car had a courtesy light, its dull glow seemingly

the only illumination on the entire camp site at the moment. The storm clouds were obscuring the moon so outside, it was as dark as inside the caravan. He could hear their neighbours moving around in their own living space, presumably having been woken by the lightning strike and now wondering what the cretin next door was up to at two in the morning.

The car's headlights, once he had started the engine, provided even more reassurance, their beams cutting through the darkness and banishing shadows to a reasonable distance. Kevin couldn't help but fear what was beyond their comforting glow, though. Once the engine was started he had to move fast - he didn't want to explain to Sindy what he was doing - so he put the car in gear and made his way out of the site and onto the main road, reminding himself for the hundredth time since the holiday started that they drove on the wrong side of the road in this country.

As he concentrated on seeing through the driving rain and keeping the car on the slippery tarmac, Kevin tried to remember where it was he had picked up the figure. He thought he could pinpoint it exactly - just beyond a road sign in a dip in the road, about a mile from the site. He knew - he *hoped* - that if he put the figure back he could make peace with this spirit or whatever it was that had visited him. He pressed the accelerator pedal, keen to get this over with as quickly as possible. He rounded a corner and the bright light of an oncoming vehicle dazzled him, a horn sounding. With a shock he realised that he had drifted onto the wrong side of the road, and jerked the wheel to the right just in time to avoid the truck, the car only slowing slightly. Pins and needles passed over his scalp as he realised how lucky he had been. He laughed and glanced in the rear view mirror to see the tail lights of the truck disappear around the bend. The blank eyes of the creature stared back at him.

Cold hands grabbed him, one round the throat, the other across his eyes, pulling his head back. His hands fought to keep the car on the road as his foot scrabbled for the brake pedal, but it was too late, he felt the tyres bump on the edging stones, sensed the change in surface as the car raced over grass - then he was released from the creature's grip, his eyes just registering the oncoming trees before the impact, his seatbelt unable to protect him at this speed, body mangled and pulped as the car folded in on itself, metal screaming and glass exploding as enormous forces took their toll on steel and plastic, flesh and bone.

***

His vision swam into focus. He was looking up at a brilliant blue sky, tiny pink edged clouds dotted across it. The sun was high overhead, dazzling him, but for some reason he couldn't close his eyes to shut out the

glare. He tried to lift his hand to shield them, but nothing happened. He couldn't feel his hands or his arms. He couldn't feel anything. Suddenly his view shifted slightly, as if he had been pushed to the side. The tops of trees were visible, bottle green against the beautiful azure of the sky. A jolt and then he was looking back up at the sky again, the sun's rays searing his vision, yet he felt no pain.

The view changed again. The sky rotated around him, and more trees came into view, rolling up from underneath him. He could see a battered pick-up truck parked at the side of a road. With a shock he realised where he was. France. And with that realisation came memories of that night - the storm, the creature… Sindy. A face came into view, close up, studying him intensely. A young man, deeply tanned, with a stud through his eyebrow and a shaved head. A roll-up cigarette hung limply from his mouth. He muttered something, smoke escaping from his lips, but the cigarette remaining stuck in place. There was a violent shudder, and everything, the trees, the sky, the man, seemed to move upwards slightly. Then another. The man stepped away from him and made a square with the thumb and forefinger of both hands, looking through the gap intently for a couple of seconds. The world shifted to the left slightly, then the man raised his thumb, mouthed some more words and wandered off towards the truck. Another man, this one older and shorter, appeared from the side and joined him. They jumped into the pickup and it roared off, leaving a cloud of blue smoke in its wake.

Cars went past. It rained. It went dark. It got light again. Still he could not move, could not even blink. Idly, he wondered how long he was supposed to stand here, and what he was waiting for. Why did no-one come? Where was Sindy?

More days passed. Time ceased to mean much.

Then she came. Sindy. In a car he didn't recognise (of course, he'd smashed theirs up). And she wasn't alone, her mother and sister were with him, looking pale and sombre in the early morning light. Sindy looked terrible. Her tan had faded and her pale skin was covered with spots. Under her eyes were dark rings. Her eye make-up was smudged, as if she had been crying. She came right up to him, so close that he could see the individual hairs in her eyebrows, and the flecks of green and orange in her irises. She looked so sad. He wanted to tell her it was okay, that she should cheer up, but he couldn't speak, couldn't touch her shoulder, give her a hug. Her mouth was moving but he couldn't work out what she was saying. Her sister came up behind her and put a hand on her arm, her face troubled, but Sindy shook it off, falling to her knees. After a few minutes she stood up again and he could see tears streaking her face. She started to talk again, looking straight at him, her words getting more urgent, ugly lines appearing around her mouth as she grew angry, her

hands balled into tiny fists, hitting out at him. His vision rocked up and down slightly, but he felt nothing. Then her sister was there again, along with her mother, both holding her , pulling her away. This time she didn't fight but went with them, turning to bury her face in her mother's shoulder. She gave him one last look before she got into the car, her hand raised, fingers wiggling. Their secret wave. Then she was gone.

***

Sindy knew it was wrong, knew it was stupid, but she had to do it. It had been a month since the funeral, but she felt no better. She'd kissed Kevin's cold lips goodbye and watched as the coffin was lowered into the ground, but that wasn't her Kevin, that mangled, sewn-together lump of meat. She'd seen what was left of her husband the day after the accident when she identified the body, and at that moment she had convinced herself that her husband wasn't anywhere near his broken body, he was still there, in the place where he had died. The counsellor had encouraged her in this belief, telling her that if she needed to grieve, needed a place to remember her Kevin, it didn't need to be the graveyard where his body was interred. It could be anywhere. Like the place where he died.

But Sindy had had a better idea. She didn't need to visit that horrible road when she could bring a part of Kevin back with her… something so perfect that it would always remind her of him.

She would never stop blaming herself for his death - after all, it was her fault that he was travelling down that road at that time of night, her stupid insistence that he put the figure back which had resulted in him storming out in the middle of the night to do just that. She needed to make amends, and this was perfect on so many levels.

She'd never negotiated the Dartford Tunnel before, Kevin had always been with her to drive through it. As the gaping maw of the tunnel entrance rose up to greet her, she smiled to herself. But he *was* here. Now he would always be there. The hired car drove into shadow as she sneaked a glance in the rear-view mirror at the lump of wood lying across the back seat, the car filled with a yellow glow from the lights in the tunnel ceiling, shadows criss-crossing the car interior. It was funny… the way light could play tricks with your eyes. It was almost as if something was moving back there.

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FAMILY MAN

by Wayne Mook

In her little black number Susan sat looking for the right victim until she spotted him hidden in a corner of the hotel bar. Complete with cheap suit and golden ring of protection, he was a gift.

Susan had meant to give it all up but life had become so tedious. Now was time to act. Sooner or later they all get caught but not if you are careful, not if you know what you are doing. Now she had a plan and to get back in the swing of things and what could be better than a nice simple family man to ease her back in.

She smiled as she wriggled in next to him thinking, "He's cute. No matter what happens I'm going to enjoy this."

"So is your bark much worse than your bite?" She huskily breathed before he could react.

He blushed and stammered; already his defences were beginning to crumble. It was like she had never been away. She built up confidence, stroked his ego making him bold until he thought he was in control, but what to do later? Well the night could take care of itself, she decided.

She was still undecided as she lay in bed and he straddled her.

"You know sometimes we tell lies," and the words seemed to trigger his jaw loose. It extended like a snake's jaw, dropping down but impossibly so. The whole jaw seemed to elongate and widen but at a speed she could hardly comprehend. It gave her no time to scream, or to be sure that she really heard the sound of hungry children coming from his growing maw before the darkness bit.

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666

FRESH SOULS

by Billy Turner

Dorset, 1973
Friday

For almost three miles after hitting the countryside, the tarmac road weaved its way between hedgerows, walls of green obscuring the landscape beyond. The morning had begun clear and bright but now the late afternoon sky was beginning to grey.

"Typical!" Gates sighed from the passenger seat, his face up close against the windscreen and tilted to the sky.

Potter glanced out of the side window. "Could just be a passing shower."

"No, it's waiting." Insisted his friend, eyeing a particularly large, black cloud.

Potter grinned and shook his head. "We wont be fishing until tomorrow now, anyway."

The blue Cortina cruised along the tree-shaded lane with neither passenger speaking for some time. The two men had been friends since infant-school and now, fast approaching forty, the silences between them were as comfortable as a pair of old slippers.

As the rows of trees and hedgerows whizzed by his window, Potter's mind drifted back to the conversation he'd had with his wife some days ago. "It'll do you good, Charlie. You seem to have this notion that you can't leave me alone, for some reason. Go. Take Bob with you. It's only for a weekend, for goodness' sake."

"But what about the office?"

"Charlie, you run that place single-handed. You deserve a little time off. If they begrudge you that then they're not worth the bother."

She was right of course. Work had been hard recently and Potter felt that his age had long since taken over his years. A relaxing weekend of salmon fishing would help stem the flow. His recounting of the conversation was broken just then by Gates's voice.

"What's this place called again?"

"Stoke Abbot. Oh, It's beautiful Bob. Liz and me came here a couple of years ago. Only a few miles from the coast actually but I doubt we'll be going that far. Unless you fancy a nice juicy bass instead of salmon, that is?"

Gates slapped his hands together and shifted excitedly in his seat.

"Nah, got my mouth set for salmon now. How much further to go then?"

"Few miles, that's all."

Just under an hour later, Potter crawled the Cortina across lose stones and pulled up alongside the sidewall of Mabel's Guesthouse. He killed the engine and stretched hard before glancing at his watch.

Gates was sleeping but stirred now, aware of the still silence.

"We here?" He muttered.

"Yep, and just in time for tea. Come on!"

They climbed wearily from the vehicle and grabbed their bags from the rear seat.

"That cloud never broke did it?" Potter said tipping his head to the sky.

They stepped through the foyer and into the snug, where a plump, elderly woman stood behind the bar. She had her back to them and was polishing wine glasses with a small white cloth, before hooking them onto a wooden holder above her head.

The two men scanned the place and found it pretty much deserted, spare an old man in one corner who raised his glass of stout and smiled kindly at them. They nodded back and approached the bar.

"Excuse me." Said Potter after setting his bag down at the legs of a stool. The woman didn't respond.

"You'll have to speak up lads," the old man in the corner called over. "Deaf as a post is old Mabel."

"Okay, thanks." Potter said with a smile. He cleared his throat.

"HELLO!" It came out slightly louder than was necessary and the woman spun quickly on her heels looking somewhat startled.

"I'm sorry. You haven't been standing there long have you?" she said. "I'm a little hard of hearing you see. What can I get you?"

"No, that's okay." Potter said, smiling awkwardly. "We have a room booked and I was just wondering where we check in."

"Ah! Mr. Potter is it?"

"That's right. Charlie's the name and this is my friend Bob."

"Okay. If you'd just follow me." Mabel walked them round to the end of the U-shaped bar where a small table stood, on it was a large black book.

"Now, while you do that, I'll get you your drinks. What will you have?"

They ordered a pint of bitter each and promptly took their place at a small round table under one of the windows.

The guesthouse was old. Potter had learned, whilst reading the pamphlet he'd picked up during his plans for the trip, that it was built in 1708 and had, remarkably had very little structural alterations. He was admir-

ing the thick wooden beams that ran the length of the ceiling when Mabel arrived with the drinks. She placed them down on the table and said, "Will you be eating with us tonight chaps?"

"Certainly. I think we're both ready for a good hot meal. What can you offer us?" Potter said, rubbing his hands together.

"Well, we do a beautiful hot-pot - renowned in these parts it is. Ask Arthur," she said, throwing a nod over in his direction. "We also have duck, with all the trimmings; trout and today's meat dish is a juicy beef-steak served with boiled potatoes and vegetables. We don't really bother with a menu. We're only a small guesthouse and especially at this time of year, you understand."

Gates had been quiet throughout the meal and had left a good portion of his duck. Later, up in their room, Potter enquired over his friend's mood.

"I'm not really sure Charlie," Gates said looking up from his bed. He'd had his nose tucked into a fat paperback but his constant turning back and forth of its pages suggested it was rather heavy going. "Ever since we arrived I've felt ... oh, I don't know, a bit detached."

Potter dropped himself into a battered old armchair positioned at the window and looked out into the darkness. Rain-droplets patted noisily on the weather-beaten sill outside, and below puddles collected on the empty lane, reflecting golden light from the guesthouse windows.

"Well, I've got some more bad news for you. Look at the weather"

"Typical!" Gates said mechanically, turning back to his story. Potter suspected Gates was using the book as an excuse not to converse. He didn't pursue the matter however, and by 10.30 they were both sleeping well.

Saturday

The rain was still falling as they dressed for breakfast, but by the time they'd finished their meal the black clouds had been blown away to reveal a pale blue blanket spread as far as the eye could see, and it was with great vigour and anticipation, at least on the half of Potter, that they loaded up the car's roof-rack with their fishing rods.

A gentle twenty-minute drive saw them to their destination and after tackling-up they climbed into their waders and strolled thigh-deep into the gently flowing, iron-coloured water. Gates was the fisherman and had cast out long before Potter had executed his clumsy effort.

The two men stood a good twenty feet apart and any communication meant having to pitch their voices above the wind and rippling flow of the river; it was hardly conducive to intimate conversation and Potter

wondered if their distance was wholly necessary.

Back at the guesthouse Mabel stood, her weight on one leg, waiting for the pint-pot to fill with the black stout. When it finally neared the rim of the glass she knocked off the tap and waited for the creamy head to settle. She took it over to Arthur's table and sat it down in front of him then, after hesitating, sat herself down next to him.

"I think he's the one, Arthur," she said, trying hard to contain her excitement. "He's showing all the signs isn't he?"

The old man took up his glass without speaking and swallowed a good inch of the black liquid.

"Well?" Mabel pushed.

"You think they've chosen him?" he said finally.

"All the signs, Arthur? He's not eating his meals, doesn't speak, and never joins his friend for an evening drink."

Arthur thought for a while, taking two long sips of his stout in between.

"We'll ask him this evening. If he's the one, he'll know."

Mabel squirmed on her seat.

"Oh, Arthur. It's been so long. Not since little Sara, and that was more than three-year ago." Her excitement faded as an unpleasant memory resurfaced. "Her parents Arthur. Oh, I'll never forget the look on their face as we had to …"

"We had no choice Mabel," Arthur snapped. "They're gone now anyway. And just look at Sara, she couldn't be happier."

At 5.30 the fishermen returned, empty-handed and headed straight up to their room to freshen-up in preparation for dinner. But at the last minute Gates decided not to join his friend, keeping up the pretence of feeling unwell.

After eating alone, Potter headed for the bar and decided to stay there until Mabel ordered differently. It saddened him but the last thing he wanted was to be in the company of Gates just now.

The snug was fuller now than it had been since their arrival. It was filled by at least a dozen locals – strangely, none of them this side of fifty.

Except one that is - one that Potter couldn't help but notice.

She was no more that ten-years old and appeared not to be with anyone in particular. Yet at the same time seemed totally at one with everyone around her. She mingled amongst the bodies, tugging at the coat hems of various people. They usually dismissed her with another drink or packet of crisps but it seemed to satisfy the girl at least.

It was during this moment of people-watching that Potter noticed three men disappearing through the stairwell. Odd, in that - as far as he

knew - he and Gates were the only residents Mabel had at the time. Three pints of bitter later however and his arousal had been well and truly drowned and it was with a weary hand gesture that he bid Mabel a goodnight and stumbled up to bed. He undressed in the dark and climbed under the sheets. Had he switched on the lights, he'd have noticed Gates's bed lay empty.

Sunday

"I think I'm coming down with something," Gates said brightly and without the usual concern such a statement would bring. He was probing his face in the wardrobe mirror. He turned to Potter, shaving at the sink. "Look at the colour of my skin."

Potter swivelled his head around, one side of his face bearded in white foam.

"It's this country air," he said, turning back to the cracked mirror balanced on the soap tray. "You're not used to it. Anyway, you sound a bit more cheerful this morning?"

"Yeah, sorry. I was feeling pretty rough, but everything's okay now." He opened the wardrobe door and grabbed a shirt. "Least the nice weather held up?" he said, feeding an arm into one of the sleeves.

It was true, the nice weather had continued but Gates's previous statement was still playing on Potter's mind. There was something in the way he'd said: 'Everything's okay now.' He wasn't about to jeopardise his good mood however and continued their conversation.

"Yeah, no doubt it's beautiful here. Not sure I'd want to live here though."

"How do you mean?"

Potter pulled the razor away from his cheek to talk. "Well, don't you find it a little...weird?"

"Not at all." Gates said.

"Mind you, you weren't in the bar with me last night."

Potter pulled the plug and lifted the face towel from its hook.

"What was so special about the bar last night. Mabel do a strip did she?"

"I said weird, not bloody frightening," Potter mumbled through the towelling. "No, there was this girl," he continued, placing the towel back on its hook.

"Oh yeah?" Gates's sprang into life, suddenly interested in the tale.

"Calm down, she was all of ten," Potter said grinning. "Pass me a shirt please."

Gates opened the wardrobe and grabbed the nearest shirt, tossing it over to the far bed.

"Well, what about her?"

"Oh, I don't know. She seemed perfectly normal. It's just she didn't seem to be with anyone. And that's another thing, there were at least a dozen people down there last night"

"Maybe they were in the toilet."

"Who?"

Gates sighed. "Whoever it was you seem to think this girl should have been with."

"Maybe. But there was just this air of great confidence about her, like she just belonged."

"I don't quite understand the point you're trying to make, Charlie. This is a tiny village remember. Everyone will know everyone else. She probably knew everyone in there. And vice versa. The reason she looked so comfortable is because she probably does belong."

"Probably."

"And you say the country air's affecting ME. Come on, let's go and get some breakfast."

Potter had noted an air of irritability creeping into Gates' voice since the mention of the young girl, and over breakfast this irritability turned into one of his silences.

Half way through the meal Gates stood up and left the table without a word. Potter noticed that Mabel had witnessed his leaving and waited for her to wander over, casually, to find out what had caused it. She never did.

Once again, Potter finished his meal alone and returned to their room expecting to find it empty. Instead, he found his friend sat on the chair by the window. He watched Potter as he closed the door.

"It's over, Charlie." The tone of his voice was flat and cold.

Potter sat on the end of his bed and looked deep into the man's eyes, they had darkened and seemed vacant.

"What? What's over? What are you talking about Bob?"

"Us. We're over."

Somewhere deep down in the man's soul, Potter could still see his friend.

"Look, Bob. Maybe it's best if we cut this little trip of ours short."

The man stood up suddenly, making Potter jump.

"Arthur and Mabel will want to see you shortly." At that, he strolled out of the room.

Potter hastily dug their suitcases from the bottom of the wardrobe and stuffed their belongings into each. Something was very wrong and the sooner they were out of there, the better. He shuffled out onto the landing with the two suitcases and bundled his way down the stairs and into the snug where he stood the luggage up against the wall. Mabel was placing a pint of stout in front of Arthur.

"Have you seen anything of Bob?" Potter asked.

Mabel didn't answer as she walked back behind the bar. He leaned into the counter and asked again, louder.

"She heard you the first time son!" It was Arthur.

Potter spun around and glared at him. "I don't think she did, Arthur."

"She didn't fail to hear you," he insisted. "She simply chose not to answer you."

The two men held each other's gaze for some time before Potter turned back to Mabel. "What the hell's going on, Mabel?" His tone was littered with panic. "Where's Bob?"

The plump landlady stared at him, expressionless. Then said, "Sit down Mr. Potter!" She nodded to where Arthur was sat

"I think I'll stand if it's all the same to you!"

Mabel came from behind the bar and sat next to Arthur. Potter's eyes now darted between the two. His legs weakened.

"It's easier to absorb shocks when one is sat down." The old man explained, his tone somewhere between sympathy and relish.

Potter's legs were now beginning to shake and he thought it best to take the advice. He lowered himself slowly into the seat, a feeling of nausea bubbling in his gut.

"Bob's with us now, Charlie." Arthur began. It was said so matter-of-factly.

Potter swallowed hard and looked at Mabel. She was smiling.

"H-h-h-how do you mean?"

"His soul has been taken you see. They chose your friend's soul to feed on."

"It starts like a virus," Mabel said, taking over the proceedings. "lying dormant and only surfacing occasionally, hence your friend's odd behaviour. Poor dear. He wouldn't have known what was going on," she continued, looking genuinely sorry for Bob's torment. "His suffering is over now though. He's fully infected. He's ours now, Charlie."

Potter couldn't speak.

Arthur continued to overload Potter's already fragile brain. "The spirits here at the guesthouse need fresh souls to feed on, you see? That's why this place is so reasonably priced, to encourage visitors. Not everyone who comes here is taken unfortunately, and the building grows very weak sometimes. Bob has filled it with life once again." The old man fanned his arms up and around in an arc above his head.

Oblivious to the fact that Potter was now ashen and sweating heavily, Mabel spoke again.

"The unfortunate part of this, however," she looked at Arthur like she was about to announce the bad news in another-wise normal conversation. "Is that those who aren't taken, have to ... disappear. Like young Sara's parents for instance. You know Sara; you were watching her last night? She was the last you see, to be taken. But that was almost three years ago. We were begin-

ning to wonder if the spirits would be able to find anybody suitable again."

The explanation was complete and a silence fell over the snug, finally giving Potter a chance to speak. He eventually managed to compose himself sufficiently and swallowed hard.

"Look, I don't quite know what's going on here but if you can please just tell me where Bob is, we'll go and never mention what's happened here." He had to swallow again before finishing his sentence. "I promise."

"Bob? Of course we'll tell you where Bob is," Mabel said with a proud smile. "He's behind you."

Potter swivelled slowly on his stool.

The dozen or so people he'd seen drinking happily yesterday, were all present once again. This time though, they were not scattered randomly about the room but standing, grouped and in front of the doors that led to the foyer, and outside.

Near the front of the group was a man in his late-thirties. It was a man Potter recognised as Bob. But the man he was looking at belonged with those around him...and always had.

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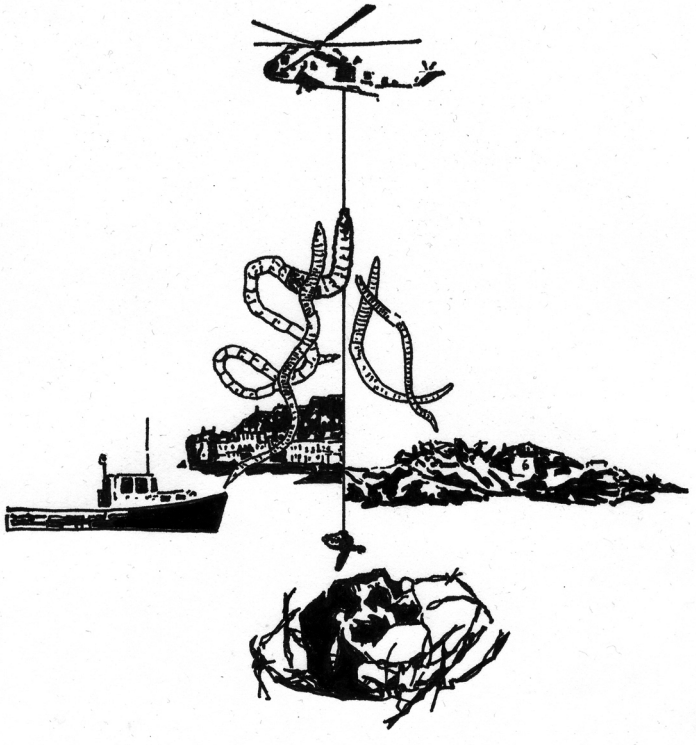

SURFACE TENSION

By Neil Christopher

I was closing up for the evening when the bedraggled, shivering form of a fisherman, at least that's what I assumed he was, fell through the door. Since the fishing trade had been reduced to a few lobster boats after the 70s spat with Iceland, trade in a harbour side café like mine drifts off after dark, and the only reason I open past five in the winter is that it gives us old bastards somewhere to plant ourselves that's cheaper than the pub and less lonely than our houses. It also saved this guy's life.

It had blown a force six northerly all day, and on the back of those frigid winds straight off the mountains of Norway had come squalls of ice pellets and sleet, dancing over the cobbled surface and water of Breen Bay's tiny harbour. Tom Shadwick and his lobster boat 'Emily Gray' had come in around mid-day, happy with the catch but complaining about the icing on his masts and fittings. By the time Don and Graham had also brought their shellfish ketches into the relative safety of the harbour walls, holds full of cockles and Suffolk's finest prawns, the wind had increased to a near-gale. They drank their tea and ate their food in near silence. Taking pots off the North Sea floor, among the blizzard of spits, reefs and islands off Breen Bay's pitted coast was not a pleasant exercise in weather like this. Don and Graham had fished cod off Greenland in hurricane winds, but even they weren't prepared to risk running aground on the islands. Well, one island, if we're being honest about it, and what's the point of telling the story, if you're going to bullshit all the way through it.

No, it wasn't a night to be out at sea. By seven in the evening, the regular crowd turned up to drink tea, smoke cheap roll-ups and chew over the events of the day. There was Billy Warhurst – in his late seventies and crippled with arthritis, who came in to share a smoke and a cup of tea before heading to The Crown to drink away the pain in his back. There was Mick Dawes, an artic fisherman before the 70s killed off the long range fleets – he was the closest person to a friend I had in this place, and when we weren't here, we'd be fishing off the Point, or watching the fighter jets race over the islands firing their guns at targets far out to sea. This particular night, Billy had just left for his evening in the Crown's snug, and Mick and I were sat, radio playing jazz too quietly to really hear, listening to the sleet beat against the windows, when the freezing, drenched man staggered through the door.

Mick was up in an instant. The guy was clearly in a bad way, his skin was pale and his eyes sullen and dark. The snowflakes in his hair had not melted and he was dressed in a light, cheap waterproof that really wasn't

up to the job, jeans and walking boots. We knew instantly he'd come off a boat, but wondered which idiot had let someone so badly equipped set foot on a boat in this weather. Mick grabbed the guy before he could collapse and grimaced as he caught hold of the man's cold, sea-water soaked skin. "Gerry" he said to me, "help me get this fella sat down". We plonked him in a chair by the window and he slumped down, mumbling under his breath words I couldn't hear.

"Christ, he's cold as ice" Gerry started to remove the soaked waterproof and replaced it with his own coat. "Get the guy a coffee will you , Ged. Not too hot, and put a slug of brandy in it". Gerry had to feed him the eye-opener and I knocked up a hot water bottle. We both looked at his face and hoped to see the colour start to return. We'd seen hypothermia from our time on boats, and we knew that, if it was too far advanced, what we were doing would have no effect. As he warmed up, his teeth began to chatter and to shake hard. It was a good sign. He finished his coffee and I made another, this time without the booze chaser, and by the time he'd got halfway down the second cup, he was becoming coherent, though clearly he was close to panic.

"They're out there!" he stammered "they're still out there – we hit a reef, Mark and Robbie, they're on the beach! They were in the water!" He looked at us both with darting, sparkling eyes. "Call the fucking coastguard!"

"Calm down fella". Mick's voice was low. "Tell us what happened." The man coughed, a deep growl from low in his lungs, and I began to wonder whether he was in the first stages of pneumonia. "I told you! They were in the water, but they got ashore – they'll freeze to death – call the coastguard for fuck's sake".

"We can't call anyone until you tell us who you are, the name of the boat you were on, what happened to it and where you want the coastguard to look."

I was firm, but frightened. In this weather, being in the sea, even if you get out quick, is pretty much a death sentence.

He seemed to calm down a little when he realised that this was serious. "My name is Rawlings – we chartered a boat from a guy in Lowestoft for me, my son and a couple of buddies to do some sea fishing. We're up from London." I shot Mick a look, and he picked it up. He was thinking what I was – drug courier. "I've piloted small boats in the Thames, so we took it out on the OK of the Boatyard. I've got my class II" he fumbled in his pocket for the paperwork demonstrating he was competent to pilot powered vessels shorter than 30 feet in length. "I'm not the Maritime Agency, sunshine" Mick said "so I don't need to see your paper. What's the name of the boat, and what state's she in?"

"She's called the Eastern Glory, out of Green Gladstone yards in

Lowestoft. We hit a reef, or something. I was in the pilothouse, but my two colleagues were thrown into the sea. She's in the harbour there", he pointed feebly in the direction of the harbour, beyond the curtains of sleet. "She was taking on water, but I think I patched it up enough to keep her afloat. Please, you've got to call the coastguard!"

I walked over to the 'phone. "When did this happen, and where?" Rawlings looked at the clock on the wall over the specials board. "About two hours ago, but I saw them swim and come ashore on that Island, so they're out of the sea". That was good news, at least I though so at the time. Mick was obviously further along in his mind than I was. "Son, there are fifty-odd islands and sand-bars out there, it would help if you could give us some idea which one."

"The big one with the buildings on, the shingle one. I remember because it had a load of signs on the beach. I couldn't read them, but there were buildings, so maybe they found some help?" He sounded like a frightened five-year-old clutching at straws. He must have seen our faces, because he immediately scowled. "What's wrong? Ring the coast-guard!"

I didn't even know where to begin. Fortunately Mick did. "We'll make the call now. You need to get into some dry clothes." He turned to me, face brittle and set "Gerry – where do you keep your dry wet-weather gear?"

"Upstairs," I stammered "first door on your right." I pointed the way past the kitchen. "Are you alright to get up the stairs on your own?" He looked at me in disgust, and I realised that I didn't like him. Not just for the fact that he was stupid enough to have gone out in this weather, nor that he had done so ill-equipped, but also because he had no idea what fate he had condemned his comrades to. He stood up carefully, but looked fairly sure on his feet. "I can manage, old man" he spat. "Just phone the fucking Coastguard!"

As he disappeared up the stairs to get changed, I put the phone back on its cradle. Mick had moved over to where I stood and spoke in low, conspiratorial tones.

"Harper's Spit" he said, "Fuck me".

Everyone local to this stretch of the Suffolk coast has a story about Harper's Spit. It was a long, low shingle island, barely 700 yards across, but over two miles long from the army harbour at the north end, to The Eye, a weird, shifting lagoon of quicksand and sea couch at the southern point. It had been used as a lighthouse site in the 1800s, until the great storm of 1870 had washed it into the sea. It had been used by smugglers, until one too many had been lost to the torturous currents that eddied around it. In the First World War, it had been used as a naval gunnery range and in the Second World War, as a secret base for testing radar. In

the 50s, it had been taken over by the MoD and used for God knows what. What was tested there remained a mystery, and one of the local sports was offering opinion on what lethal weaponry was designed within the walls of the half-dozen buildings that sat, decaying and damaged in the centre of the island.

To some, it had been used to test A-bomb components, and was now deadly radioactive. Others believed that chemicals or germ warfare tests had taken place there, like the anthrax island off Scotland. More fanciful suggestions included genetic research or new super-weapons that were so secret, the government decided to destroy the facility for fear that its research would leak out. Either way, the secrets of Harper's Spit died with the facility in 1972, when an explosion ripped through the low warehouse type structure known as Building 6. The army came off that night, and took everything worth salvaging with them, before RAF Buccaneers bombed the remaining buildings. Now the island sits like a beached whale, silent and brooding, with signs along the foreshore warning those tempted to land on it that the island belongs to the MOD and that landing is strictly prohibited. Even the local kids avoid it. It's a dead place.

I'd only met one person who claimed to have worked on Harper's Spit. He appeared one sunny evening a few years ago and sat outside the café, when I used to keep a couple of picnic benches outside the front windows, overlooking the sea wall. He was called Lake, and he ordered tea and sat, staring at the misty form of Harper's Spit across the sound.

"You know The Spit?" I asked, in that way that sounds like you're interested, but in reality you're not. He looked at me with pity and sadness. "The question is, my friend, do you?"

"Just stories" I smiled, but felt uncomfortable. He looked back over the sea. As I walked back towards the door of the café, he started talking.

"You ever hear of a guy called Moxley-Thompson?" I stopped and sat down opposite him. He didn't give me chance to answer. "He was brilliant in the true sense of the word. His intellect shone like a beacon. I first met him in London in the 50s – he was a theoretical physicist and he worked under Einstein, though in all honesty they were equals. He was responsible in no small part for the British atom bomb project, but by the time I'd met him, we were looking at even more implausible ideas for the Army. We spent three years on that godforsaken place." He gestured towards the Spit "…and we suffered from that peculiar agony of scientists throughout time. We were so certain of what we wanted to do, that we didn't step back to see whether we should."

Over the next hour, he told me what they had done on the island. "What do you know about metastable vacuums?" He laughed instantly, I didn't. I'm a fisherman, not a contestant on University Challenge. The government was working on a project to create a shield around ships and

airfields using something called metastable vacuums. A place in space where every particle, even at a sub-atomic level was at its lowest state of energy. The theory being that, if you fire a bullet, or drop a bomb into a metastable vacuum, it would simple cease to exist, the various alloys, propellants and destructive matter together would be robbed of their cohesive force, and they would simply revert to their constituent elements. The ultimate defence. Lake and Moxley-Thompson worked for years on trying to create a metastable vacuum to see if it would have the properties they'd hoped for. They were thwarted by lack of power for the equipment they were using, by the primitive conditions on the spit and, as Lake admitted during our conversation, by their never acknowledged fear that they were working with forces neither of them really understood.

"What happened" I asked him, desperate to get off the subject of particle physics. He looked at me for the longest time. Then he finished his tea and stood up.

"We created it," he said quietly. "God help us, we created it."

He began to walk away, and I was struck with how old he looked, and how haunted. I was walking into the café and Lake turned to me. "We created it, Mr Evans, and we looked into the face of Leviathan".

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Mick and I didn't speak of Harper's Spit, but its reputation was such that we didn't need to.

"Ring the Coastguard," he said, getting his wet weather gear on. "I'm going to look at this clown's boat." He stepped outside and jogged across the road towards the tiny harbour. I spoke to the Coastguard as Rawlings came down the stairs in some old waterproofs. He looked more together, but his teeth still chattered a bit.

"Look man, I'm sorry I bit your head off" he began apologetically "I was just worried about my mates." I looked at him, wondering what kind of idiot goes pleasure fishing in a force seven northerly in January, but I kept it to myself.

"The Coastguard are ringing back in two minutes. There's a North Sea ferry in trouble in the Humber, and at the moment they're short of resources. They want to talk to you." Panic washed across his face again.

"Short of resources, what does that mean? Short of fucking resources."

"I don't know. Perhaps we should wait until they ring back, they might be a bit clearer."

"Fuck you." He moved seamlessly from panic to anger, and again I wondered whether his 'out fishing' story had any truth in it at all. "You

wait for them to ring back, I'll take my boat out there and bring them back"

"Like Hell you will". Mick slammed the door shut against the sleet. "That boat's still floating by the will of God and not much else". He pulled back the hood of his coat. "Go back out there, and they'll be hauling your body off the beach in the morning." Rawlings looked at us both again, that familiar look of panic returning. As he did so, the phone rang.

"What do we do?" His Adam's apple bobbed, and I thought for a moment he was going to burst into tears.

"You could answer the 'phone" I said. "It's the coastguard". Rawlings picked up the phone and gently put it to his ear. I moved close to Mick and he shook the water off his coat. "That boat's knackered – it's still taking on water. It'll stay afloat if it's kept in harbour, but it'll sink out on the sound, or lose power. Either way, he'll not make it to the Island."

"Coastguards up to their eyes in it tonight" I whispered, "What do we do if they can't mount a search? He won't sit and wait." We decided on a course of action by the time Rawlings slammed the 'phone down.

"Fuckers won't mount a search until dawn. I told them where they were and they still won't do it."

Mick walked up to him. "Son, if you go out in the boat you brought in here, you'll sink and die. You're borderline hypothermic and you're in a state of panic. Frankly, you're in no state to go out there on your own."

"So what am I supposed to do – sit here and wait for them to freeze to death?"

Mick ignored him. "Gerry, get him some oilskins and bring whatever you think you might need for when we get there." It was a euphemism and hung heavy in the air. "I'll meet you on The Barton in 15 minutes." With that he was gone, heading back towards the Harbour. Rawlings looked confused. "What's going on?"

I took the stairs two at a time. "We're going to find your friends" I shouted. I picked up my oilskins, and took my shotgun and half a dozen cartridges from the wall cabinet and put them in the gun case. I also lifted the rosary on the bedside table – it was my mothers, I didn't have much store by the Catholic faith, but fear makes Christians of us all. Ten minutes later we were on Mick's boat, heading for the harbour entrance.

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The Crossing took 45 minutes, but it felt like hours. There's a particular kind of purgatory in travelling across heavy seas in a small boat. The Barton Queen was a fine boat, well set and capable in high seas, but no boat, however good, can completely off-set the stomach-churning impact of the waves. I shut my eyes on deck – the sleet had mercifully stopped

– and tried to block out the sound of Rawlings vomiting and Mick cursing from the pilot house. My mind went back to that man, Lake, outside the café, who had spoken of metastable vacuums and secret experiments on that warm summers evening.

I had chased after Lake as he walked away from the Café.

"Lake, I understood 25% of what you've just told me, and to be honest I've no idea whether you're bullshitting me or not, but what the fuck is on that Island?"

He looked at me, and then stared across the ocean.

"Mr Evans, what do you think is on that Island? Ghosts? Werewolves? There are many monstrous things in the world, Sir, all of them created at the hand of mortal man." He saw I wasn't satisfied with the answer. "Everything, every little particle in the universe is energetic. What if that constant energy in all things functions like the surface tension on the top of a pond. It forms a protective barrier between the subsurface world and a completely different, hostile world on dry land, a body that provides a protection for those minute animals swimming in the water from the perils above and beyond. We broke our surface tension on that island, Mr Evans, and we looked, for a few seconds upon the dry land beyond." He turned away from me and shuffled across the road towards his car.

"What did you see?" I shouted.

"I can't tell you" he said "but I can share this. If you have any cause to be on that place, Mr Evans, any cause at all, do as you must, but stay clear of building six. In that building we broke the surface to a place man was never meant to see and the inhabitants of that place, they saw us too."

I was awoken from my thoughts by Mick, cursing loudly in the pilothouse. I staggered over to him. "When we get there lash her up to the mooring like you mean it - we're on there not a second longer than needed." He was smoking one of his foul-smelling roll-ups and I started to feel sick. I told myself it was the sea and not the thick, shingle beach to our starboard, with it's algae-covered warning signs and low, clinging bushes covering Christ-knows what.

We landed and I tied the boat up against the one mooring still more or less intact. We stood on the pier, torches pointing off towards the dark centre of the island, where the buildings were. Building six. Rawlings had been shouting the names of his companions, but no-one answered, his voice swept away like confetti in a whirlwind. Mick took hold of him and looked him dead in the eye, as I fingered the shotgun case, trying desperately not to unlock it.

"Listen to me," he said, shouting above the crashing waves. "This place was a bombing range and God knows what else. Stay on the tarmac

and stay with us. If your friends are here we'll find them, but if you race off without thinking, you'll step on a 50 pounder, and they'll need a bucket and mop to clear up what's left of you. Do you understand?" Rawlings nodded that he did, but I wasn't convinced, and neither was Mick. We set off for the dark hulks set against the horizon, Rawlings shouting continuously.

We walked, and Rawlings called for an eternity, though it could only have been perhaps an hour, and the futility of the exercise became almost overwhelming, but, as I was about to suggest to Mick we turn back, a thin reedy call was carried towards us in the wind.

"David?"

At the sound, Rawlings began to run, screaming "Robbie, Robbie" at the top of his voice. Mick shouted after him "Rawlings, wait!" but it made no difference. We ran behind, I unlocked the shotgun case and threw the shells in my pocket, casting the case to one side as I picked up speed, past the fence, rusted and torn that formed the boundary to the building complex and before we knew it, we'd caught Rawlings up and were in the centre of the compound. The man, who had barely been able to stand only a few short hours before coughed hard and pointed in joy at the building remains in front of us. "They're safe! I heard Robbie! They're in here." I shone my torch over the door of the squat concrete structure and stepped back involuntarily. A hand painted, wind and spray-weathered sign was stuck at head height next to the door. In crimson, it read:

Building number 6.

And Rawlings was gone, through the door and into shadows. Mick pulled me with him, following behind, I couldn't move unaided. We ran down a corridor thick with a stink I recognised but could not place, and the freezing temperature was replaced with a musty, cloying heat. Mick seemed not to notice, intent on catching Rawlings who was moving faster than our aged bones could compete with, trying to find the source of the voice calling him. We ran, and then jogged and, finally caught up with Rawlings who was standing in front of an open doorway, wider than 12 feet across, staring.

The door was covered in what I can only describe as a veil of darkness, shifting and moving shadows beyond seemed to have form and then disappear like the apparition of fish moving silently through milky water. The heat was unbearable and the smell foul, but there we stood, listening to the voice of a 12-year old boy calling for his father, except now, the voice was not so pure, but seemed like it was mocking, strident.

"He's in here, I can hear him" Rawling said "Robbie! Dad's coming for you". He moved towards the doorway and I instinctively grabbed him arm. He swung round at me. "What the fuck are you doing?" I must have

looked like death walking, because his joy drained away.

"Surface tension" I said. "Don't go in there". He wrenched his arm free and moved towards the shimmering darkness. As he did so, it parted, and for a second we could see.

To Rawlings, it was a little boy, with blonde hair and a fishing rod, and he stumbled through the threshold with tears of joy streaking his face. To me it was an abomination surrounded by abominations, a creature beyond the imagination of a Bruegel painting, its face a writhing, pulsating mass of worms, its legs that of a goat or pig, and it greedily moved towards Rawlings, dragging him off into the shadows as its cohorts jumped and stared and croaked. I was transfixed. Then it reappeared, in a form horrible and blasphemous and familiar. It moved to the edge of the dark veil, and it looked at us from whatever vile place it was monarch of and from it's Caprean lips it spoke words I did not understand, with a voice I could not block out.

"hic haec locus infernis"

Then, the darkness descended and we heard Rawlings screaming and we ran.

***

Our trip to Harper's Spit was almost three years ago, and Mick and I have met many times since then, but we've never talked about it. The Coastguard searched, but found nothing and after a couple of days, they called it off, figuring that, as the boat was safe, so were its occupants. I said nothing, for my own shame, and I took sleeping pills to help me sleep without visions of worms, and shifting, man-made darkness and Leviathan, with its thick voice and eyes of fire.

I write this, so that my actions may be understood, to those few he may mourn the death of an old man. The shotgun at my side will be my end - sooner that than the alternative. You see, I translated what it said to me and now I understand how metastable vacuums work. Leviathan said "this place is Hell", and I saw enough to believe him. It wasn't referring to its world, looking through the window created by man which allowed it to gaze upon ours. No, it simply knows its physics.

Metastable Vacuums always expand.

(c) Neil Christopher 2006

THE MAN

By James Brough

Grown ups were funny. When they were woken at 3am because he'd had a nightmare, they said "You're a big boy now." Or "You asked for a room of your own all this time." And "Don't be such a baby." They didn't understand how the pile of clothes on the chair changed once the lights were out. He wasn't sure quite what it changed into – it was dark. His dad told him "Don't be silly, it's just the shadows" and went back to bed. He'd nodded and agreed at the time, but his dad was only ever in there when the lights were on, so how could he possibly know?

Anyway, they were funny. At night, they said he was a big boy. But now, here he was in the queue to see Father Christmas. He'd said he didn't want to, that he was a big boy, that Father Christmas wasn't real but his mother had said "Don't be silly, all little children love Father Christmas". Then his father had talked about how much he would have liked to have seen Father Christmas when he was a child. So that had settled it. They'd told him he'd have a lovely time and that of course he wanted to see Father Christmas and so he'd agreed. Now they'd gone off to look at other things and had left him in the queue. He was at the front now and could see the fat, jolly man in the red and white suit and the shiny black boots, beaming a smile through his cotton wool beard. Next to his throne was the bag, with the presents spilling out, covered in red and green paper.

It was his turn now. He walked into the grotto and stood in front of the man, telling him his name, where he lived, what he wanted for Christmas. And all the time, he was looking. The black cracked nails on the hand held out to him. The broken veins in the crooked nose. The stains worked into the brown leather of the boots. The grey chipped teeth as the grinning mouth gaped at him through the scrubby whiskers. One large hand sank into the bag and rummaged, emerging with a wrapped package. When he took the parcel, it was moist and slightly warm and what was in there was soft. The imprints of the man's fingers were still on it. Something that was in the bag had started to writhe and slime trailed from the bag to the man's hand. Slowly the mouth of the bag tipped forward and a grey discharge oozed from it. He stepped to one side as it pooled towards his feet and he smiled up at the figure on the throne.

"Thank you very much, I must be going now", he said with desperate politeness.

"Goodbye," came the man's voice, "I'll see you on Christmas night.

I hope you've been good."

"Oh yes," he said, as always.

"Oh, I know you have."

He was lying in bed now, listening. Earlier, he had heard the sounds of his parents downstairs, fetching the presents from the cupboard in the dining room and arranging them under the tree. They had gone to bed now and the house was silent but still he was listening, because he knew that sometime soon he would hear the thump of the brown boots on the stairs and the sound of the sack being dragged behind. In the dark, near his bed, something squelched. And then he realised what it was that the pile of clothes became when the lights were out.

(c) James Brough 2006

THE HERMIT

by Billy Turner

17 Taylor Lane, Harford, Devon – a house shrouded in mystery and home to an elderly gentleman who went by the name of Oliver Rambaldi.

Rambaldi was indeed a mysterious individual. Rarely seen in the hours of daylight and the subject of various nasty rumours regarding his practices.

Despite the dilapidated condition of his home, he appeared to be a wealthy man and owned one of only three large detached houses in Taylor Lane. My wife and I, as of six months ago, owned one of the others and it was her, and her too-kind heart, that persuaded me to try and befriend the recluse.

"People aren't forced to become hermits," I told her. "Why can't we just leave him be? He's probably a very happy and content man."

"Just speak to him, Tony," she said as she loaded up the dishwasher with the breakfast plates "Please. I feel sorry for him." Her request was loaded with the threat of the sulks if I didn't comply.

"Right, right! I'll go and see him."

"Here," she grabbed a Tupperware box from the worktop and thrust it forward. "Give him these cakes and tell him we're sorry we've left it so late to make his acquaintance but …"

"Yeah, I get the idea." I took the box of cakes and left through the back door.

As I strolled along, squinting from the glare of the early morning sun, I tried to prepare my introduction but the distance between our houses was short and in no time at all I was standing by his garden gate.

Heavy shrubbery on either side caused me to duck and weave my way to his front door where I knocked firmly. After a rather lengthy wait and a second hammering on the door, I heard the familiar sound of bolts being pulled. Eventually the latch clicked and the door creaked open slightly.

In the gloomy hallway, just visible in the crack between door and frame, I could make out one side of a shadowy, cloth-capped figure.

"Yes?" It said, in a higher pitched voice than I expected.

"Mr. Rambaldi?" I asked, trying to see round the door.

"Yes?"

"Sorry to trouble you," I said weakly. "My wife and I moved into the house just down the road recently and we thought we'd just say hello."

The one-half of Mr Rambaldi I could see seemed to observe me for some time before mumbling something and opening the door wider to

allow me access. Without waiting to greet me he shuffled back down the dimly lit hallway and left me to close the front door.

A heavy stench clawed at my nostrils as I thread my way between stacks of yellowed newspapers lining the walls of the hallway – a mere pre-cursor to the squalor awaiting me.

Finding it impossible to hide my disgust, I observed the scene before me in stunned silence. Waste bins so full that the debris was allowed to simply spill across the floor, milk bottles full of what could only have been urine and the filth continued; large joints of meat rotting away on the dining table, the worktop, on top of the fridge, on the floor. Some cooked, most of it raw and no doubt the source of the foul stench.

For the first time now, I focused on Rambaldi. I looked over to where he stood peering through the kitchen window at the jungle that had become his back garden.

"Mr. Rambaldi," I began solemnly. "How long have you been living like this?'

He ignored my question.

"How old are you?" He asked instead, keeping his back to me.

I was rather puzzled by the seemingly irrelevant question but explained that I was thirty-seven.

"Ahh, so young."

He was silent for some time, almost reflective, and I began to wonder if he was going to speak at all.

"As I was saying Mr. Rambaldi," I prompted. "My wife and I moved into the house nearby recently. She's sent this little gift." I made a futile gesture with the Tupperware box, pointless as he still had his back to me.

Again we stood silent for some moments.

"Do you believe that youth can be…" he paused while searching for the right word, "re-claimed?"

I was fast becoming tired of his crazy questions and decided he was obviously mentally ill. I suddenly had the urge to leave.

"Anyway, I hope you enjoy the cakes." I said, searching for a clear area of worktop for which to place the box. I ended up stacking it on a bag of stale, unopened sliced bread.

"Well?" Rambaldi said suddenly, referring back to his question.

"Re-claimed?" I said, hoping I could cut the discussion short. "Like a fountain of youth you mean?"

He let out a slight chuckle and I heard him suck back saliva, "No, no. That's mere folklore. I mean through medical science. Alas, my efforts have failed miserably. Skin grafts are very susceptible to infection."

"Oh! Plastic surgery? Very expensive and the results seem somewhat poor in my opinion." I had no idea where the crazy man was going with this.

"Expensive? On the contrary, it hasn't cost me a penny. You see I perform all the operations myself."

Now, finally, he turned slowly to face me, lifting the cap from his head as he did so.

The horror that met my eyes then will occupy my every nightmare.

A scalp of jet-black hair, sat precariously aloft his otherwise bald head where a row of crude stitches had been fashioned to secure the fleshy toupee. His eyebrows were shaven and more human hair had, from all appearances, been glued in their place. I tried to drag my gaze away from the grotesque mask but found it impossible to do so.

The nose was bulbous and outlined by scabs and infections where the graft had failed to take and the rest of his face and neck had been pulled so taut that he found expressing emotions almost impossible.

I noticed a tear fall across his right check and he tried, rather pathetically, to smile at me. His red lips parted to reveal massively swollen gums and an irregular row of blackened teeth.

Suddenly something deep within my subconscious rang out, a warning bell alerting me to something I'd failed to detect earlier, something other than the monstrous figure that stood before me now.

I found myself scrutinising the oversized joints of meat that were spread around the kitchen and the full horrors of the situation slowly began to dawn. I refused to accept what my brain was telling me.

"I must try again," Rambaldi said mechanically. He was now heading in my direction, a long bladed knife in his hand. "Your skin is just perfect. It must work this time, it must!"

Terror gripped like a vice and I feared by legs would buckle if I tried to move. I let out a cry and hurtled down the hallway, toppling newspapers behind.

As I frantically yanked open the front door and bundled my way outside my toe caught on the doorsill and I fell headlong into the shrubbery. Pulling myself up onto my knees I grasped desperately for the garden wall until my fingers hit the brickwork. I clambered over the knee-high barrier and sprinted home without ever looking back.

Epilogue

It took the police less than fifteen minutes to respond to my emergency call and in all, the remains of nine male bodies were discovered. At the hearing, Rambaldi, with no legal representation, happily pleaded guilty to the killings. Clearly insane, he was sentenced to live out his life in Broadmoor Mental Hospital. He died of a heart attack just three years later.

(c) Billy Turner 2006

THE CASE OF THE FRAGRANT PHANTOM

By Matt Bowdler

It was a gay old, grey-gold, clay cold Christmas in London. The rough hewn skies littered the populace with a coat of rain. However, the bright buttons of yuletide lights cast through, and even the pockets picked were lined with festive cheer this year.

I had decided to return to the warmth and comfort of 221b Baker Street, as the ale house I more commonly frequented with my old wartime chums was full to the rafters. The good-humoured Christmas carols were already giving way to their more coarse variations; the chapel vestry replaced by the rugger vest.

As I entered the drawing room Holmes was busy at the fire grate extinguishing a great fire. On closer inspection I noticed he was laying a large sheet across the flue.

"Will a normal stocking not suffice this year, Holmes?" I inquired.

"Ah, friend Watson," he replied, "This is not a stocking for presents but a safety net for our sweep boy. I'm afraid Jack has become comprehensively stuck, and my attempts to smoke him out have failed."

I inspected the torn bed sheets he had erected above the smouldering cinders.

"That is not enough to catch a wiry, young lad from such a height. He'll break his bones. I've no mind for my medical methods to be called into action at this hour."

"You may leave your stethoscope in its case," Holmes placated. "I'm afraid my attempt to smoke the poor lad out had the unfortunate result of burning him to a crisp."

I was too shocked to utter any words. My eminent friend continued to poke and stab with a number of implements in an attempt to release the corpse. I noticed that he was beginning to become frantic, and feared one of his melancholy moods may take hold. His final weapon of choice sufficed; a jewel encrusted croquet mallet that the Shah of Amankorldstan presented to him after he rescued his kidnapped thumb.

The body fell to the hearth like a spaniel's ear.

"Ah! Excellent!" Holmes exclaimed. "I don't think we could have borne a boy in our chimney for the entire festive period."

"Indeed not," I replied. "Even a brush-boy requires a Christian burial."

"Hmm? No, I was rather thinking of how Father Christmas would deliver my presents with seven stone of solid ash blocking his descent. And he might ruin the Arabian rug."

"How can you be so hearth-hearted?" I said, frustratedly.

I had become used to my colleague's egocentricities over the years but, at Christmas, he was almost intolerable. I understood that the very insularity of his nature was what gave his detecting such clinical genius. However, all his mastery fell under the shadow of his pursuit of a fat stocking.

Like most years, December was a fallow period for investigation. As the summer sun fell into autumn until there was no warmth, no light, no vember, cases were less forthcoming. It had been near eight weeks since Holmes had triumphed in The Adventure of the Laughing Headscarf, and even longer since The Buttered Priest Tragedy or Marge Versus The Monorail.

221b Baker Street was beginning to show signs of neglect. The Belgian typewriter was covered in cobwebs; a gift of ceremonial gold-encrusted lollo rosso from the Tory MP Sir Courtney Cox-Arquette had decomposed, causing a stain on the shroud from Turin that from some angles now vaguely resembled a bearded man; and the chaise longue had now become over-run by a family of barnacle geese.

Holmes was slumped in his chair sucking on his pipe, which he had filled with Dairylea. In this state of ennui it was only a matter of time before he moved on to some harder poison. Perhaps Laughing Cow or, if matters took a turn for the worse, Primula.

Such a fate, fortunately, never came to pass as there was a rap at the door. Holmes's ears keened to the muffled discussion between our visitor and Mrs Hudson. We both listened intently as gentle footsteps climbed eighteen steps up to the door of our chamber. Which surprised us as there are, in fact, only seventeen. The door opened slowly.

A well-dressed man stood before us. His jacket and breeches in the high-Austrian fashion; made from the skin of weasels and weevils and decorated with toy horses.

"Sherlock Holmes? My name is John Huffham."

"Welcome welcome, Mr John Huffham. I am afraid to say that I have not read any of your books."

Our visitor stared back at Holmes, his mouth agape. His skin turned a whiter shade of pale and his hair skipped the light fandango.

"But, how could you possibly..?" he flustered.

"Elementary. Please take a seat and I will explain."

Our visitor pushed a goose out of the way and seated himself.

"It is quite obvious that you make your living from writing. Your right hand tells the tale. It is a most admirable storyteller, much like yourself I imagine. There is a clear indentation on both your forefinger and your thumb, consistent with the firm grip of a pen. You may be a mere Goodge Street scribe but, alas, you dress smartly in the high-Austrian fashion.

Therefore your daily toil at the foolscap is clearly providing you with a modest income."

Our guest sensed a trumping. For which I could only apologise.

"I am rich and use a pen. Could I not be an architect?"

"You only have a callused wrist on your right hand. Suggesting that your left is not employed with use of the protractor or set square. And you are wearing a t-shirt bearing the idiom: "My mother went to the All England Mothers of Famous Writers Festival, Godalming 1884, and all I got was this lousy t-shirt."

John Huffham blushed and apologised. It turned out to be his trumping after all.

Holmes rose from his chair, slightly too far, his hovering clearly unnerving Mr Huffham.

"My apologies," Holmes said noticing our caller's discomfort. "I did not mean to undermine the gravity of the situation. Perhaps you could enlighten us with the events that brought you here this eve?"

Our visitor toyed anxiously with the miniature horses on his left lapel.

"Then shall I. I will tell you my tale. The tale of The Fragrant Phantom!"

"And that, gentlemen, is the tale of The Fragrant Phantom."

I could scarcely believe my ears. Mr Huffham's story had sent such a chill down my spine that left coccyx like a choc ice. It was fantastical. It was phantasmical! And yet, my dear detective dilettante had sat through the entire discourse as if only hearing the detailed report of an accountant going about his breakfast. He did not shudder at the description of the mendacious voice of the aforementioned apparition. He did not shiver at the depiction of its monstrous face. He merely shrugged.

"My dear Mr Huffham, perhaps I could interest you in a similar story I read in the Evening News Standard yesterday?"

He took the paper and read aloud.

"Page five. A report from Rottingdean. Mrs White had a fright in the middle of the night. Saw a ghost, eating toast, halfway up a lamp-post."

He looked over at Mr Huffham with a rather amused look on his face. The writer was apoplectic.

"I was lead to believe that you are the foremost mind in London!"

"You are mistaken. I am the foremost mind in England. And when I am on vacation in Switzerland, I am the foremost mind there too."

"And yet, you cheek me like a common otter?!"

"The common otter? No. Perhaps, more the Sussex otter. They are braver and therefore more easily advantaged."

Mr Huffham drew himself out of his seat, screwed up the drawing, got up out of his chair and threw it at Holmes. Then he threw the drawing at him. Holmes stood stony-faced at this outrageous response. I thought to put my hand on my trusty revolver but, Holmes made to placate the bedevilled man

first.

"Before you tear the wallpaper from the walls Mr Huffham, I think I have solved your little mystery."

The man stood before Holmes astonished, his rage made immediately impotent. His mouth fell open and his ears fell off.

"You said that when this apparition appeared that you saw a strange orange glow and smelled a strange odour, sickly and sweet. Tell me, this smell, did it remind you of anything?"

"Why yes, but..."

"Did it conjure up a memory of a huge Mexican talking about the best way to store figs to a pillar box?"

"No."

"Good, at least we have established that you're not insane." Holmes swung his overcoat on reached for his cane. "If we are quick we may apprehend the miscreant. Come!"

"There is your phantom!" he cried leaping from the dog-cart like a careless whisper.

We both stared from the coach window into the Christmas mist. A faint orange glow emanated from near an underpass.

"Your ghost is none other than Ian Van Dahl, the notorious Dutch master criminal and florist. Clearly he read of the fortune you have accrued with your novels and decided that he would milk you like a bitch."

Two policeman grabbed the Dutchman and drew him towards our carriage.

"There. You see? The source of the strange orange glow and the sickly sweet smell. Fuchsia Magdalena, Van Dahl's signature flower. A rare and beautiful creation, and probably the only one of its kind in England."

My eyes strained against the dramatic radiance of the flower. It shone like a Mediterranean sunburst.

"You see, gentlemen. The fuschia's bright, the fuschia's orange."

(c) Matt Bowdler 2006

UNKNOWN
Died 1878
Taken by the sea

A particularly meagre epitaph for one who had laboured to his thirty-fourth year in the earnest belief that his life's work would one day blossom into greatness and enduring fame. Yet his wretched spirit remains not in this place for the sake of some petty, frustrated recognition. The remote coastal communities of this island boast many such nondescript grave markers in their dissenters' burial yards, those places set aside by righteous Christian men who do not wish to share the hallowed earth of their final rest with Hebrews and with those whose faith and identity are uncertain due to the circumstances of their passing, but time and again the legend "Taken by the sea" conceals far less palatable truths. This is just one of them …

STORM DOG

By Paul Newman

John Marlowe staggered south along the beach, blind in the furious night with only the frigid wind at his back for a compass. Keening gusts repeatedly pummelled him into the low dunes and away from the roar of the breakers pounding invisible on the shale, snatching up tormented eddies of sand to hiss against his clothing and scour his flesh wherever it was exposed. He was a painter of no repute and he clutched his work to his chest in a bulging portfolio of scuffed calfskin, bundled clumsily in his only overcoat, with the manner of one bearing a treasure whose worth he sincerely believes is greater than his own.

His free hand groped in the impenetrable darkness and he trudged exhausted after it, breathing in great gasps of wet salt air and exhaling muttered imprecations. His neck was chaffed raw and his left shoulder ached, the heavy satchel slung from it beating painful time on his hip like an erratic lead metronome. His modest portmanteau and all other effects were lost behind him in the gathering storm. Marlowe flinched as a dull, grinding concussion from the east told him the worst of it was still some way out towards the black horizon but heading inshore at a pace.

There it was again. His senses were overwhelmed and cancelled by the dissonant howl of the wind, the crashing waves and oppressive darkness yet still he knew an instant's certainty that he was not alone on this blasted shore. He froze like a parlour game tableau vivant, straining to detect even the tiniest shreds of physical evidence to account for the greasy knot of dread in his throat but found none. After a long minute, in

which the only sign of life he could identify was the rapid beating of his own heart, he allowed the buffeting at his back to drive him on once more.

A portion of the night before him resolved itself into the suggestion of solid matter and he stumbled for it, numbed fingers telling him it was the hull of an upturned fishing smack. Trailing his palm over its blistered coating of pitch for the scant comfort of contact with anything more substantial than himself, he flailed around the prow and dropped into the relative shelter afforded by the boat's leeward flank. Still the wind plucked incessantly at his damp frockcoat and loosed a scattering of rain as he stared wildly about him into the void. Nothing.

Hunching his body around his precious cargo, Marlowe squirmed hard against the side of the vessel and tried to shut out the irregular shriek of the air. His teeth chattered ceaselessly but his mind was still fluid enough to unleash a steady litany of curses; on the tormenting elements that harried him to this place, on the slack-faced bumpkins who had wordlessly expelled him from the inn at Sea Palling and, most savagely of all, on himself for the whim which had led him to take a working holiday in the bleak desolation of the north Norfolk coast in February.

The chill air and moist sand insinuated glacial teeth that gnawed deeper towards the marrow of his bones and his body began to tremble uncontrollably, muscles quivering in spasms which began with a writhing between his shoulder blades and travelled outward to his extremities in a wave of contagious tics. His mind perceived these things only dimly through the cosseting exhaustion pouring apathetic weight into his veins. With fatigue teasing loose the fingers of his consciousness, Marlowe watched vacantly as a single oily drop of moisture moved like a perfect glass bead down one of the lank rat-tails of hair hanging over his brow and continued doing so for some seconds before it occurred to him that he could see. Bolting upright into the gale, he threw his head back and saw above him a great tear in the sky through which the three-quarter moon spilled its cold, sallow light. High above the thunderheads, wisps of cloud moved with astonishing speed and gleamed pearlescent as they grazed the lunar face, accentuating the sickly rings of violet, blood-rust and jade that formed its nimbus.

Suspecting he had only moments left to exploit his opportunity, he wheeled around and hurled himself from the smack, legs pistoning up the steep dunes and into the hummocks of thick marram grass at their crest. The landscape beyond was revealed faintly in coarse daubs of black and undulating grey, showing only barren heath to each side and before him.

Two things then happened simultaneously. The rent in the heavens was sutured and, even as the moon's pallid illumination was snuffed, he caught a puny reflection of its radiance wink out about half a mile to the

south-west.

Marlowe stared hard at the place where it had been until motes of light danced before his eyes, but he could see no more. Beginning to feel the first flutterings of desperation and with no other lifeline to reach out for, he set his back to the sea and marched inland as fast as the terrain and weather would allow, keeping to low ground where he was able. Shielded by the dunes, the heaving ferment of the waves was soon muted to a sibilant grumble, the wind's teeth blunted though not pulled. Twice he snagged a foot under exposed roots and both times twisted as he fell to land heavily on his side and so protect his work. Before rising for the second time he paused on his knees to catch his breath … and then bit down on it as a prickling sensation tightened his scalp and he felt again the disquieting conviction of another presence close at hand. He could see nothing, hear nothing. Nevertheless, he had the absurd notion that if he were to reach with great caution behind him his hand would encounter something more terrible than any storm, lurking silent and still at his shoulder. Once formed in his mind, the impression grew until it became so strong that he feared to move.

Minutes passed and he might have cringed there until dawn with the sharp grasses whipping his face if a brief flicker of lightning and its attendant crackle of thunder had not startled him to his feet and spurred him frantically on. Still he could not shake off the feeling that he was pursued and the same apprehension which had paralysed him now gave his limbs renewed vigour. His random course took him swiftly down a shallow incline of sand until his feet found the impacted surface of a worn and well-sheltered trail, crowded close on both sides with dense gorse.

Taking heart, he pressed on as fast as his sightlessness allowed and, rounding a turn, discerned a weak glow ahead. Fat drops of rain began to fall. Within seconds it was coming down in stair-rods. Marlowe made for the light, his gasps seemingly amplified and distorted by the gully through which he ran until they sounded like the belching of a great locomotive. He found himself standing before a squat cottage, flint-knapped and with a roof of crude shingles. A detached corner of his mind realised it must have been the roof he had spied earlier as it briefly reflected the moonlight, but he was already moving to the solitary window beneath it.

The dirty amber luminosity that had been his beacon was an oiled sheet of parchment hung on the other side of the filthy pane of bull's eye glass, lit from behind. He could perceive nothing beyond it. Keeping close to the irregular walls, he circled the dwelling and came to its entrance on the opposite side, a door stoutly made and braced with iron, flanked by a shuttered window on either side which bled diffused puddles of light. Above the lintel a beam jutted out, and a modest wooden keg swung from it by a pair of squealing chains. Pale markings suggest-

ed writing but he could not make it out. Thunder grumbled directly overhead and the rain intensified its tattoo on his skull. He fumbled for the heavy iron latch and pushed, but the great door did not budge an inch. He shoved with his shoulder to no better effect and had raised his fist to begin pounding on the weathered timber when the latch clacked sharply up and the door swung towards him. He snatched a step back with his hand still upraised and threw himself through the opening - puzzling for an instant as to why an exterior door should open outwards and why a secluded country inn was equipped with a door jamb of such sturdy construction that it would have looked more at home in a fortress - and felt the breath knocked from his lungs as he sprawled onto flagstones. The door was pulled to behind him with a dull thud, blissfully reducing the ferocity of the quickening storm to sound alone; a drumming of rain on the windows and a castrato wailing about the eaves.

Panting, wildly dishevelled and soaked to the skin, Marlowe realised he cut an outlandish figure, and struggled to his knees with an apology half-formed on his lips. It died there as he raised his eyes and forgot any concerns about his appearance.

As a child, his parents had scrupulously ensured that he had access only to the most appropriate reading material but, on the sly, he had thrilled to the occasional tales spun by his father's groundsman. He had been a cadaverous native of Edinburgh who took gruff delight in filling young Marlowe's head with the grisly footnotes of his homeland's history. Most chilling of these was that of Sawney Bean, a monstrous brute who dwelled with his large, inbred cannibal brood in a cave on the isolated Ayreshire coast in the late Thirteenth and early Fourteenth centuries. Numbering in the region of forty-five persons, they lived by robbing, murdering and eating unwary travellers, until an armed party under the personal leadership of King James I finally cornered them in their ghastly lair - and found it festooned with the remains of some thirty-seven victims and an assortment of pickled limbs set aside for hard times. The Bean men were sentenced to an agonising slow death by mutilation, their women shown mercy and merely burned alive.

Peering about him now into the shifting patchwork of firelight and shadow playing across the scene and its five occupants, Marlowe was forcefully reminded of the story and wondered if he had not happened upon a homestead of the bloody clan's distant descendents. The ceiling was all but invisible behind rack upon rack of curing herring, the angles where walls joined the floor obscured by a riot of fishing gear, tools, chandlery, battered chests, a heap of tangled nets with cork floats and a warped chaos of cut driftwood piled haphazardly on either side of the substantial fireplace to his right. Five rough tables and a selection of mis-

matched chairs and benches filled the room's remaining space. These were separated from a selection of bottles and hogsheads against the left-hand wall by a counter formed of sturdy planks laid across three sawhorses. Candles as thick as a man's wrist guttered on each table, several more behind the bar. The window through which he had first seen the light was deeply recessed and on its sill perched a lantern more macabre than any Marlowe could imagine. He stared at it in fascinated disbelief. It was the corpse of a seabird, dried, with its wings akimbo, head thrown back and feet set in an irregular lump of clay. A wick protruded from its gaping, blackened beak and burned with a tawny flame, releasing a dark, oily smoke as it fed on the reservoirs of rich fat in the unfortunate creature's stomach.

A heavy leather apron blocked his line of sight and a pair of hands like calloused paddles grasped him by the lapels and hauled him to his feet. Their owner was a man somewhere between forty and sixty, his severe features weathered by lifetime spent outdoors, but not unkind. A square-cut spade of grey beard jutted from his jaw line but the rest of his face was clean-shaved. He gave Marlowe an almost imperceptible nod.

"Ambrose."

"Marlowe. John. John Marlowe." His voice sounded tremulous, as if he doubted his own identity. He proffered a hand but the man had already raised his own to Marlowe's shoulder and steered him towards the hearth.

"You'll be needing to dry off a spell. A drink, too."

He went to the makeshift bar and in a moment returned with an earthenware tankard half-filled with rum. Marlowe reached into a sodden waistcoat pocket for coins but the man had turned away. He took a large swallow of the harsh liquor, amazed himself by not spluttering it into his lap and glanced around at the inn's other occupants. Three men at a table directly before the counter – fishermen or labourers, to judge by their dress, and of about the same indeterminate age as the landlord, ruddy of complexion and rimed with a day or two's growth of stubble - returned to a hushed conversation and made a conspicuous show of examining their drinks and filling fine-stemmed clay pipes with tobacco torn from a plait lying between them. The fifth man perched on a low stool near the burning seabird and had the eyes of a newborn in an ancient's face. He stared at Marlowe without expression, his eyes screwing tight every few seconds in a pantomime of exaggerated blinking, his mouth agape. The fire hissed and snapped as the storm made a renewed assault, the eerie sough of the wind winding its way down the chimney. Marlowe ventured a tight smile at the man's blank scrutiny but dropped his gaze when it elicited no response.

"Don't you pay no mind to the Boy Davey," the landlord counselled him from behind the counter. "He's what you and yours might call sim-

ple but he's not been any the worse for it these past more'n eighty years. Doesn't see too many strangers. Neither does The Fisherman's Return. Not on a night like this. And, in any case, certainly not gentlemen like yourself. Sir."

The slight hesitation before the honorific gave it the thrust of a prompt, an invitation to explain himself. Marlowe looked up from the fire and considered how to respond without making himself sound a complete ass.

"They …" He faltered, wondering as much as his audience what was going to come out of his mouth. "They … they threw me out of the inn, The Rising Sun, at Sea Palling. Tonight. Not two hours ago." He briefly contemplated cursing his persecutors once again but swiftly thought better of it. They might be kin to his present company. He looked around the dim room and saw the men watching him steadily.

"Sea Palling? That's as unlikely a spot for you as here." The landlord clearly wanted more.

The simple ancient dipped into his mug without taking his eyes from Marlowe and raised his head with a moustache of watery foam trailing onto his chin and threadbare grey jersey.

"I came here for…" Oh, to blazes with how it made him sound. "I came here for the weather."

The trio at the table burst into rough laughter, but it seemed good natured rather than scornful and Marlowe took heart.

"I'm an artist. A painter. Of landscapes. The coast of East Anglia is perfect for me at this time of year because," he threw a glance upwards, "because it gets so much weather. What I was after are those magnificent, bruised skies that so captivated Turner and, well, I was originally planning a trip to the Yorkshire coast when an acquaintance told me the East Norfolk Railway had extended the North Walsham line as far as Cromer only last March and I thought it would be simplicity itself to make my own way south from there at my leisure, until I could return to London by train from Yarmouth. And so it was. Until tonight."

Marlowe noticed a faint vapour was rising from his drying clothes. He took another deep draught of rum and looked to the landlord to replenish his tankard. It was poured and the man was on his way back to the counter before he spoke.

"That's very well, sir, but it doesn't explain why Sea Palling chased you out into a night you wouldn't wish on a dog."

"In truth," Marlowe replied, "I'm as ignorant as you may be as to their reasons. I simply took a table to dine and made some offhand remark to the effect that perhaps they might consider accepting a sketch of a local scene I had just completed, as payment for my three nights' food and lodging. They barely glanced at it and the next I knew I was escorted out-

side with some force. I protested, naturally, but they wouldn't have any of it and barred the door behind me. Wouldn't even let me back into retrieve my belongings. Night was already fallen and I resigned myself to making my own way down the coast. And here I am …"

"P'raps they weren't lovers of your particular art," one of trio laughed and, as his companions chuckled along, added "Sir" in a faintly condescending tone.

"It would appear not." Marlowe felt a flush of irritation colour his cheeks.

"Here," piped up another, a man smaller than the others with something in his features suggesting a cunning intelligence, "let's have a look for ourselves. See if we can't improve the standing of the men of these parts in the minds of educated folk like yourself."

Before Marlowe could raise any objections, the man rose and ambled over with an easy swagger, cocking an eye over his shoulder at his cohorts. Marlowe caught the ghost of a wink before the man was at his side and stooping to add a couple of lengths of wood to the fire. The ingenuous look on his face left the artist little room for manoeuvre and he reluctantly bent down to remove the portfolio from the protection of his overcoat, placed it clumsily on his lap to loosen the ribbons binding it closed and extracted his sketchbook. He handed it to the man, who began leafing through.

"Oh, the shore, very nice … the shore … the shore again … ah, more shore." With each page he kept up a running commentary for the amusement of the others. Marlowe bristled slightly but reasoned that if a little ribbing was the price he must pay for sanctuary, then it wasn't so expensive on a night such as this.

"Wouldn't be anything improper in those pictures of yours, would there?" asked the landlord as he swabbed down the counter with a filthy rag. The amused set of his mouth indicated he meant nothing by it and was merely having a little fun at the outsider's expense. "Only, a cousin of mine once married a man from Sea Palling and reckons they're all of a God-fearing sort up there."

Up there? He made it sound as if it was in another county. Another country, even.

Marlowe coerced a smile onto his own features, though it felt like forcing on a shoe a size too small. "No, I can assure you the most …" He trailed off as he realised the man with his sketchbook was no longer talking nor turning the pages. With a sickened lurch in his gut, Marlowe saw he was staring fixedly at the last sketch with an expression he had caught on the faces of those at The Rising Sun earlier. Fear. No. That didn't begin to do justice to the contorted mouth, widened eyes and trembling jaw. If he began screaming for his life that instant, the man could not

have appeared to be in greater terror.

"What on …?" Marlowe began, but the man cut him off with a slicing gesture of one hand as if it were a billhook scything reeds. He returned across the room to his companions without taking his eyes from the drawing, flipped back one page and wordlessly placed it before them. They craned their necks at an awkward angle to see and Marlowe felt a weight within begin to fall away as they showed nothing but cheerful bewilderment. The table's candle was drawn closer. And then, slowly, an appalled comprehension crept across their faces and reshaped the features of first one and then the other until the three were alike. The page was turned to display the final sketch and they viewed it in a deathly silence made all the more onerous by the spitting of the fire and the wind's unceasing yowl. A look passed between them and they stood rapidly with a harsh scraping of chairs, drew their heavy woollen coats about them and made for the door.

"George? George!"

The landlord's call pulled the shorter man to a halt as the others threw open the door and paused on the threshold. A blast of freezing air and rain blew in and almost drowned his guttural response.

"The Shuck."

He turned on his heel and the three all but ran from the place, slamming the door behind them.

In the silence that followed it seemed to Marlowe the wind rose an octave and renewed its relentless attack on the fabric of the inn. A knotted fist of wood snapped loudly in the fire and rolled forward down the glowing embers to thump heavily to the scorched hearthstone where it continued burning unattended.

"What in the name of …?"

"A moment, sir, if you will," muttered the landlord as he moved around the counter to the swiftly vacated table.

"But this is ridicu…"

"Hush!"

With a measured slowness, the man reached down for the abandoned tablet, turned back a page and considered what was depicted on it. The visitor may have referred to these works as sketches but he was immediately impressed by the facility of the illustration, combining as it did the realism of a daguerreotype with sufficient artistic licence to suggest a heightened sense of nature's life-force. It showed a stretch of beach looking to the north. The dunes in which the artist must have been sitting as he worked on it framed the foreground and part of a building the landlord vaguely recognised and assumed was The Rising Sun intruded in the middle distance. The attitude of the sea roiling around the near-submerged groynes suggested a heavy swell nearing high tide and the vista was ren-

dered oppressive under a sullen sky of dense cumulonimbus. Out on the horizon the low flare of the sun seemed to sear its way into the waters like a divine torch. The scene felt swollen with a scarcely restrained violence, as though a vein of lightning might arc out of the sketch at any moment. It was powerful, to be sure, but nothing more.

No, wait. He raised the pad and angled it towards the candlelight. There. What was that? Way off in the distance, perhaps a mile or more from the observer, an outcrop of dunes reached towards the sea before terminating where the high water had eaten them away. There was something … He peered closer. Just a few insignificant black strokes in pencil, but the artist's skill had fashioned them into the likeness of a large hound. It could only have been his fancy, but something in its stance gave him the uncanny impression it had been caught on paper an instant after turning its muzzle from the sea towards the watcher. An emotion he had no name for tightened the skin across the chest, resonated in his breastbone, and he suddenly found himself loath to turn the page.

The second landscape was not so different from the first, although evidently undertaken from the yard of The Rising Sun in the late afternoon, to judge by the rusted winch and coiled cables cluttering the foreground. The lower vantage point and darker skies gave the beach a more imposing and desolate bearing and a shift in perspective reduced the outcrop of dunes to a small nub in the distance. There was no mistaking it now. It was clearly a dog, still a half-mile or so away and indistinct, but close and moving closer. Was it the artist's hand or his own imagination that placed the reflected glare of the waning sun in its eyes?

He lowered his head in a moment's deliberation before crossing the room to Marlowe. He dropped the sketchbook on his table.

"When was this made?"

Marlowe had watched the man in study with rising apprehension, observing the increasingly familiar play of emotions on his face and fearing their import.

"Today. Why?" His voice sounded too small to his ears. "Look, please, will you tell me what's wrong. What is it? What's wrong with…?"

"You've seen it."

"Seen what?"

"And it's seen you. Scented you watching."

"Seen what, in God's name? And what was it that other one shouted? Shuck? What does that mean?"

His answer emerged from the glow cast by the flickering seabird, in a voice creaking like a length of fat, wet rope twisted tight to breaking point.

"Dog."

Marlowe looked up sharply into the old man's cherub eyes and could only repeat him. "Dog?"

The halfwit was gripping the seat of his stool with both hands and rocking quickly back and forth with a tense jerking motion, his expressionless stare transfixing Marlowe.

"Dog. Dog! Dogdogdogdogdogdogdogdog!"

"Davey!"

At the landlord's bark, the frantic babble ceased as sharply as it had begun. Marlowe looked from one to the other.

"What does he mean, 'dog'?"

The landlord considered Marlowe for a moment, sighed and pulled up a chair.

"He means the one in your pictures."

"What of it?"

There was a clattering above as one of the shingles tore loose and skittered down the roof.

"He means it's no ordinary hound you've drawn. It's the Shuck."

"I don't understand. Why all this talk in riddles? What is the Shuck?"

The landlord regarded at him as though waiting for some internal compass to indicate the correct course. A suggestion of resignation and regret combined in his features and his broad shoulders slumped a fraction.

"It's death. Or the sure foretelling of it."

"I don't…"

"Some stories have it that the creature came with the longships in olden times, others that it's the soul of Hugh Bigod taken centuries long gone down Suffolk way by the Devil and sent back to this world as a punishment for the vileness he did in life. But all agree it is a thing of ill, a harbinger of doom for all who look upon it."

Marlowe looked at the picture before him with a cold tremor coursing down his body like snowmelt. "This is madness. It's just a dog. Some fisherman's pet, or a stray, wandering around on the beach."

"Is it?"

Marlowe cast his mind back to the previous day, confident his memory could locate the precise moment he had first seen the beast in the distance and had no doubt decided to add it to his landscape to lend perspective. He found only a blank spot swimming in uncertainty.

"It rides with the storms and takes on many shapes," the man continued in a low murmur as though reciting a lesson verbatim. "Sometimes it appears as a gigantic hound with eyes of flame big as saucers, panting like a hellish engine. Sometimes it has no head at all, just two blazing red orbs where eyes should be, floating above the bloodied stump of its neck.

"And sometimes it looks like a large black dog."

"Christ and all the saints, man, this is the age of reason! The Twentieth Century's scarce two decades away. This empire spans the globe and ties it together with roads of iron and commerce. Every day, science and medicine are pushing the frontier of human knowledge further and further into the abyss of ignorance and you sit here in this miserable hovel and tell me I'm seeing ghosts?" Marlowe was livid with indignation. "What do you take me for? A simpleton? Some credulous tourist from the town to be intimidated and scared with ludicrous superstitions?"

He bit down on his rising anger and savagely knocked back the dregs of the rum. The landlord looked silently down at his gnarled hands interlaced on the table and Marlowe turned curtly away to contemplate the fire while he collected himself. From the corner of his vision he saw the ancient swaying almost imperceptibly back and forth on his stool.

The chair grated loudly at his back as the landlord rose and Marlowe steeled himself to make an apology.

"Please, forgive me. It's just that I've h…"

"I'm sorry, sir. Truly, I am."

"Well," Marlowe began, turning, when his arms were suddenly pinned to his sides in a crushing embrace and he was lifted bodily from his seat.

"What?" he yelled. "What are you …?"

"Sorry, sir, so very sorry."

The room swept by in a ruddy blur as he was carted unceremoniously to the door, kicking and struggling to no avail. The ancient crabbed ahead of him, tipped the latch and swung it wide.

"No! No! Just wait a minute, man. You can't just throw me out into the night like this! It isn't right. It isn't … it isn't decent." He was moaning now, the fight leeching out of him.

He was carried through the doorway and around the cottage in that iron restraint until he was facing into the full force of the storm. Rain lashed his face and blinded him as peals of thunder set his ears ringing.

A hoarse voice bellowed over his shoulder: "You must go now, sir, you must go. Go!"

Marlowe was heaved forwards and fell painfully to his knees on the pathway leading to the beach. He staggered upright, cast a ferocious look at the retreating back and loosed an inarticulate howl of rage before shambling away east to become one with the darkness.

In The Fisherman's Return, the landlord closed and barred the great door and stood a moment as the water dripped from him. Long minutes passed. Then the winds rose spiralling in an unearthly howl and from somewhere in the maelstrom of clamouring air a single, shrill note climbed high and was abruptly cut off.

Moving as if he dragged a mountain with his soul, he walked slowly to the table Marlowe had briefly occupied, gathered up the sketchbook, portfolio and overcoat, bent and began to feed them to the flames.

Unidentifiable, anonymous, the body of John Marlowe came ashore down the coast one week later. It was caught fast in a snare of seaweed and old netting on a jagged groyne and discovered at low tide by fishermen of Winterton, bobbing gently in the swell like a discarded marionette. The fish had taken his eyes and much else. The undertow and submerged rocks might account for the other damage about his person - all, perhaps, save for the yawning tear in his throat which nearly severed his head from his body.

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SIDNEY

By Billy Turner

6.37pm

They were discussing the sudden absence of their next-door neighbour over dinner that particular day when Helen said something Bert wasn't prepared for.

"Maybe Sid's killed her."

Bert coughed and a piece of chicken bulleted from his mouth and landed in the trifle. "What?" he blurted.

"Well, I haven't seen her for weeks," Helen replied with a straight face.

Bert took a sip of water to help clear his throat and said, "Oh, well! He must have killed her then. Quick Helen, phone the police!"

"Alright then Sherlock." She said, taking a spoon and casually fishing out the offending article from the dessert. "Where do you reckon she is?"

"I've no idea, Helen. Maybe she was abducted by aliens." He pointed a gravy-stained fork at her. "Never thought of that did you? That's always been your fault; jumping to conclusions before weighing up the realistic possibilities."

"Well I'm going to go and find out." She said before sliding back her chair and leaving the room.

"But we don't even know them. We've never even spoken to them properly. What are you going to say when he answers the door?" He adopted a high-pitched voice. " 'Oh hello Sidney. Bert and I were just debating whether or not you'd killed your wife'."

She wasn't listening.

Sidney was a tall, slim man and always immaculately turned out. His nose was thin and elongated. His eyes were small, the gap between them, unusually wide. He was fifty-three.

"Yes?" He said, with an unloaded expression as he pulled open the door to Helen.

"Kath -" She hesitated; suddenly realising she hadn't given the confrontation a moments thought. "Kath. Is she in?"

"No."

"Oh. Well do you know when she will be in?"

"Yes."

His sharp, short answers made Helen nervous. She laughed awkwardly.

"When? When will she be in?"

"When she gets back." He said.

If this had been anyone else, she'd have slapped them playfully on the chest at this point and told them to stop teasing. But this wasn't anybody else. This was Sidney, the wife-murderer, and he still hadn't smiled.

"I see. Thanks anyway; er, sorry to have t-troubled you." She got the words out just before stammering over them like an idiot.

Sidney closed the door in her face.

"Well. Did he tell you to mind your own business?" Bert called from the living room as the sound of the front door closing came in from the hallway.

"I suppose you could say that," she answered, stepping into the room and dropping into the armchair.

"Good!"

"What do you mean good?" She glared at the back of the newspaper he was reading.

Bert folded in one corner of the paper and peered over the top.

"Well what sort of response do you expect, when you go poking your oar in where it doesn't belong?"

His head disappeared with a rustle, back behind the paper. "I'd have told you the exact same thing had you come knocking at my door uninvited."

The subject was unofficially closed, until…

Six days later - 7.48am

"Last week," she began over breakfast. "when I said what I said about Sidney next door…"

"Hmm." Bert didn't look up from the newspaper at the side of his plate.

"Well I only kind of half meant it. I suppose it was more my curiosity that made me knock at Sid's front door. But - "

"Nosiness." Burt interrupted.

"Pardon?"

"Nosiness. Not curiosity."

"Whatever. But it's been nearly a week now and I still haven't seen her. I really am concerned now, Bert."

"Know what I think?" he said, finally leaving the pages of his newspaper and picking up his knife and fork again. "I think she's left him."

He harpooned the last bit of fried egg with his fork and rested his elbow on the table, the yolk dripping onto the plate.

"Think about it," he continued. "It makes perfect sense and explains his curt behaviour when you first spoke to him." He watched the last remnant of yolk fall from his fork before closing his mouth around it.

Helen said nothing. She was never going to bring him round to her

way of thinking until she presented Bert with Kath's bloody corpse.

Bert belched, wiped his greasy mouth on the tablecloth and said, "Anyway, look at the time. I'm going to be late if I don't get a move on." He stood up, kissed Helen's forehead, and left.

Sidney opened the door. His face was relaxed.

"Yes?" He said.

"Hello Sidney. Could I speak to Kath please?" Helen's tone was somewhat mechanical.

"About what?"

"She told me she had some items for a Bring and Buy sale I'm organising."

"She's in the back room. Go through," he said, stepping back to allow her access.

It wasn't what she was expecting and was taken aback slightly. Nevertheless, she stepped across the threshold and Sidney closed the door.

Later that day - 6.05pm

Bert stepped onto the straw foot mat and pushed the front door shut. He slipped off his coat.

"What a day!" He exclaimed, hanging the garment on its usual hook.

"What a day." he repeated as he entered the living room. The room was empty. "Helen?"

Bert pushed on the doorbell of Sidney's front door. He heard it ring out in a back room somewhere. Moments later, Sidney answered.

"Yes?" He said.

"Hi. Bert's the name," he said, offering his hand. "I'm from next door."

Sidney didn't take his hand, he just poked his head into the open air and glanced across the hedge at Bert's house.

"I'm looking for my wife, Helen. She's been trying to get hold of your wife for some time now. I was wondering, has she called here today at all?"

"Yes she has."

"Oh, right. Great. And is she still here by any chance?"

"Yes. She's in the back room with Kath."

Bert couldn't contain himself.

"Something amuses you?" Sidney asked, bewildered.

"Well, I hope you can see the funny side too. My wife - " He had to stop and compose himself again. "Helen was convinced you'd killed your wife."

Sidney tried hard to smile but seemed incapable, making the process look almost painful for him.

Bert became aware of Sidney's expressionless gaze and his smile quickly faded from his lips.

"Anyway. Would you tell her I'm back from work and, er, waiting for my dinner."

Sidney stepped back a pace. "You are free to come and speak with her yourself."

He accepted the thin man's offer and stepped into the hallway.

Sidney closed the door.

"I see your wife has the same awful taste in footwear." Bert pointed to a single, upturned slipper lying on the floor. "Helen potters about the house in a pair just like them."

Sidney made no comment.

The house was silent and Bert became aware of a faint, unpleasant odour filling the air. It seemed to be emanating from the back room.

"Go through." Sidney said. "She's waiting for you."

(c) Billy Turner 2006

SECRET RECIPE

By Neil Christopher

Pearl was surprised to hear the front doorbell this early on a Tuesday morning. Normally, Agnes and Freda didn't arrive until after dinner, as eyes down for the village hall bingo wasn't until 1:30. She climbed out of her chair and put down the paper, reached for her house coat and put the kettle on as she went past towards the door. You don't call on someone at this hour and not expect a cup of tea, not if you've been brought up right. The doorbell went again, more insistently this time and Pearl tutted. 'How rude', she thought as she shuffled through the hall towards the door. She put the chain on and opened it. 'You can't be too careful these days', she thought, even though there hadn't been a burglary in the village for years.

She peered round the door. There were two men in overalls stood there. If either of them were twenty, she was a Chinaman.

"Hello?"

"Alright, love." It was the taller of the two men. He had long brown hair in a ponytail and sharp features with narrow sparkling eyes. Never trust a man who can't find his way to the barber, her George used to say. "Gas Board. We're here to check the meter."

Pearl shut the door. There was something she was supposed to do. The Help the Aged woman had told her. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to remember. She was nice, the Help The Aged woman. Very nice shoes. Quite happy to chat about this and that, and very complimentary about Pearl's home-made jam. What was it she said?

"Come on love, we've got other calls to make".

Identification! That was it! She was supposed to ask for identification. She opened the door again.

"Can I see your identification please?" The sharp-faced man looked at his colleague, a shorter, fatter man with a buzz cut and piggy eyes. Pearl noticed he had a tattoo of a bird on his left hand. It looked amateurish, like the ones her George had got when he was in the Navy. Been on the convoys, her George. Aberdeen to Leningrad, the seas in-between full of German U-boats and water cold enough to freeze you to death in four minutes. Not like these lads, hardest they'd had was a five minute walk to the shops. They both produced laminated cards and handed them to her.

"What have you got in there, love?" the fat one asked. "The crown jewels?"

She looked at them. Sure enough, the cards said they were from the Gas Board. The sharp-faced one was called Jamie Tomlinson. Pearl knew

a Tomlinson – old Wallace Tomlinson, who lived in the sheltered housing flats off Church Street. Very well turned out he was, but he wasn't a big jam eater. Diabetes, according to Freda. The other one was called Wesley Connelly. Irish. Nice people, the Irish – her and George had gone on a Wallace Arnold coach trip to Cork. It was the year that he died. She handed the identification back.

"Thank you". She took the chain off and opened the door. "Come in." Neither of them wiped their feet, and she frowned. How rude.

"We won't keep you long, love" the fat one said, " just a quick look at your meter." They both looked around the hall. Pearl shuffled back towards the kitchen.

"I'm afraid I'm not sure where the meter is" she said. "My George used to deal with all that stuff". The two gas board men exchanged a look.

"Your husband, out at work is he?" She smiled sadly. "I'm afraid not. He died five years ago." They exchanged another look, and the tall one, Tomlinson began to gently move her towards the kitchen.

"I'll tell you what, love," he began, "Wesley here will find your meter while we have a nice cup of tea, how about that.?" Tea. A fine opportunity to test her new jam recipe on a willing volunteer. The fat one started up the stairs as the tall one closed the kitchen door. He sat down at the kitchen table as Pearl prepared the tea and took out some home-made scones. She placed them on the table. She'd never really been a baker – arthritis in the hands had seen to that. You had to have knuckles like a 10-year-old to bake properly. Scones were easy enough though, even for her.

"Don't go to all that trouble for me love," he said. "Just dump a tea bag in a mug."

Pearl laughed, a deep, rumbling gurgle that finished in a racking cough.

"Give over! If you're going to make a cuppa, do it properly I say. You can taste the paper with them things." She mashed the tea and poured it into three china cups. "Tea bags indeed." She noticed him looking out of the patio doors onto the garden at the back. She set down the scones and shuffled to the cabinet, taking out a pot of plum jam. Pearl had won the WI Preserves competition three years in a row with her crab apple jelly, but this was the best jam she'd ever made.

The tall man looked at her as she put them down on the table with the butter tray.

"It's such a lovely day, why not have this on the patio?" What a lovely idea, she thought. "Why not indeed." She said, and got a tray. "What about your friend?"

The tall man smiled a thin, lippy smile. "He'll be busy for a few minutes yet. He'll find us, I'm sure."

It was a beautiful late September morning. The sharpness of the early

morning frost had been burned off by the warm sunshine. It would be a stunning day, in keeping with the glorious Indian summer. Bees still buzzed between the delicate heather flowers on the rockery adjacent to the patio and one or two late emerging Painted Lady butterflies flitted from cornflower to aquilegia like orange, animated maple leaves. There was a faint smell of cut wheat and barley in the air, and the sky was the colour of Middle Eastern seas, blue and cool. In short, a perfect day to take tea in the open air.

They sat down at a wrought iron patio table and chairs, and the tall man slurped his tea. How rude, thought Pearl as she cut the scones and lathered them with butter. If you can't drink quietly, what sort of manners would you have when you opened your mouth?

"Now, young man – would you like apple or plum?" The tall man shrugged and ran his hand over his hair and looked at his watch. "Not fussed, love. Surprise me."

Pearl was especially proud of her plum jam. The key is really plump, ripe fruit. She had to plum trees at the bottom of the garden – she could see the fruit hanging from the tree from the patio. "You must feed the trees" - that's what George had told her before he died. If you want good fruit you won't get it for long unless you help the tree out a little. Not just some common-or-garden fertiliser from B&Q either. Not unless you want your jam tasting like chemicals.

The tall man took a big bite of the scone and closed his eyes. "Damn, that jam is fucking tasty, love." The F word. How rude. Pearl would have felt the back of her father's hand if she'd used such filthy language to a lady. Still, it was good jam, and she could forgive this rather uncouth young man if all he was used to was supermarket muck.

"It's won the top prize at the WI three years in a row, you know," she said out loud as she took the third cup of tea into the kitchen. "I'll take some up to your friend."

The tall man bristled as she stood up and walked back towards the kitchen, but he didn't look round. He took another sip of tea and spoke quietly and evenly.

"Best to leave him to it, Love." He could hear her shuffling about in the kitchen, but couldn't see her round the corner. He balled his hands into tight, white fists. "If you go upstairs, he'll get upset. Just leave him to find what he's looking for." Pearl didn't seem to hear, busying herself in a corner of the kitchen he couldn't see.

"And what would that be?" The voice sounded sweet and trusting. This was like stealing from a handicapped kid. "Your money you daft old bitch, what did you fucking think?" The tall man stalked into the kitchen. What the fuck was that fat bastard doing? he thought as he swung round. They should have been in and out by now. Pearl was stood right in front

of him. She was smiling.

"Sit down love and let us get on with it, and we won't break your fucking spine." He waited for a reaction, but still she just smiled. She was wearing a 'World's best Grandma' apron and a shower cap. The tall man had just enough time to register that things weren't going to plan when he sensed, rather than saw the glint of the kitchen knife flashing through the air.

* * *

The fat man had a decent haul – he'd found some jewellery and a box of money in the old bat's bedroom, and throw in the electronic stuff, they'd probably pulled the best part of a grand. Not bad for a morning. He dumped the stuff at the bottom of the stairs, and walked towards the kitchen. The patio door was open and he walked through.

"For fuck's sake J, let's get this over with."

No answer. He noticed the patio door was open and walked up to it, to see the corpse of the tall man on his knees, his head propped against a large, battered green plastic bucket. Crimson fluid pumped feebly from a huge gash in his throat and there was a massive crimson arc of blood sprayed across the concrete patio.

"What the fuck…." So overwhelming was the grotesque sight in front of him, he neither heard nor saw Pearl appear behind him. The first he knew of her presence was the shove he felt in the back, and the dull, blue-grey steel blade poking out of the front of his overalls. A bucket appeared in front of him and he gasped as the blade was hauled back through his chest and flashed before his eyes. He may have seen the arc of blood splash into the bucket, but to be fair, things were going very dark.

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"Oh dear, what a mess" Pearl said as she surveyed the carnage. "Never mind, hard work is part of keeping a pristine home," she added as she rolled the fat man's body into the wheelbarrow, and started down the path to the garden shed. It was 11:20 – two hours before Freda and Agnes called to pick her up for the bingo. Plenty of time to clean up, she thought as she plugged in the hedge clippers and rolled the corpse onto the compost heap. The key to a good garden is a big compost heap, her George had always said and God bless him, he was right.

By one o'clock, she had finished. Just time for another cuppa and a scone, she thought as she opened the Advertiser up and started looking at the star signs. Superstitious mumbo-jumbo her George had called it, but the house prize was £250 this afternoon, and she couldn't help but sneak

a quick look.

That autumn, Pearl won the Women's Institute top prize for jams and preserves. There was a bit of a scandal in the cake judging. Mr Smythe, the retired butcher had judged that one and Mrs Collett had won, even though everyone knew Mrs Whittaker's drizzle cake was better. According to Freda, Mr Smythe and Mrs Collett had stepped out for a while, and she always seemed to get the best cuts of beef on pension day. The judge of the jams and preserves had been very complimentary about Pearl's jam.

"What's your secret?" She'd asked, helping herself to a second scone.

"Well, If I told you, it wouldn't be a secret, would it?" They both laughed. "I'll give you a clue" said Pearl, under her breath. "It's all about feeding your fruit trees. If you want good fruit, help out your trees. I swear by bloodmeal and bone, and the garden is fully organic...."

(c) Neil Christopher 2006

SPAGHETTI HEAD

by Christopher Wood

I HAD put myself to bed early, unable to take a single more jibe about my sartorial arrangements for the weekend from my friends. Since arriving for our lads' Christmas away, they had done nothing but comment on my zip-up jumper, which, they reckoned, was the height of fashion - *if* you were aged over 65 (a good 40 years on from my actual age). The general view was that it was a cardigan. I was of the opinion that the inclusion of a zip, rather than buttons, made it a "top". My so-called mates - Lewis in particular, had refused to let it lie, though. For the first hour it had been funny. But on being the butt of the hundredth "granddad" joke I'd launched a few choice words at them (only succeeding in raising the hilarity to spectacular levels), and left them in the bar.

Somehow, we'd managed to bag three choice rooms in what was a very smart hotel. Thanks to a last-minute internet bargain, we were spending Christmas surrounded by genuine Elizabethan oak panelling and exposed beams.

I'd drifted into a soft-edged Guinness-fuelled sleep with ease, despite the strange surroundings. Normally when I've had a few beers, it would take an earthquake to rouse me before daybreak, so it was with some surprise that I found myself snapped into wakefulness with pitch blackness encroaching on me from every side.

I had no idea what it was that had woken me. I had a dull recollection that it had been a loud noise, like a snapping twig or a gunshot. But at the same time I was thinking that I might have dreamt it.

Whatever the reason, I was awake. And as I lay there in my big soft bed, the heaviness of the unfamiliar hotel sheets and blankets weighing on me, I stared up at the ceiling, half wanting to go straight back to sleep, and half waiting for a repeat of whatever sound it was that had shocked me into annoyingly full awareness. None came. The silence was that middle-of-the-night nothing which is so oppressive that it has a sound of its own - a sort of cotton wool buzz in your ears that doesn't really exist. I can remember I was staring at a strange spot of light on the ceiling, a white dot which I had assumed came from a source through the curtains or under the door. It was on the plaster, mid way between two beams, and directly above my head.

As I watched the light, it started to move, rippling and expanding like sunlight on water. I lay there, looking up, mesmerised by it. I can remember knowing that I was fully awake, and firmly believing that what I was seeing was probably the result of the headlamps of a vehicle being reflected through a gap in the curtains. Then the shape above me expand-

ed suddenly until it almost filled the space between the beams, and the shadows and patterns within it moved and shifted, resolving themselves into a representation of a face.

The image was only vague at first, but it quickly became more solid, looking less like a light anomaly and more as if it had been formed out of the white-painted plaster itself. It seemed to be lit from within, casting a dull bluish glow on the ceiling around it. Further and further from the ceiling it came, reaching down towards me, the plaster around it seeming to stretch to accommodate it. The face was alabaster white, its mouth wide open in a silent scream. Where the eyes should have been there was nothing. Goosebumps broke out across my body. The eyeless, screaming visage continued to pull itself free from the ceiling, getting closer and closer to me as I lay, seemingly paralysed, in the bed beneath. I saw that tendrils of effervescent material, like living white spaghetti, were growing from the side of the head. Then I did the only thing I could do. I pulled the covers over my head and began to pray that it would go away. I don't know how long I lay beneath that warm, comforting cocoon, terrified at what horrors lay on the other side of what amounted to a sheet and a blanket. It seems almost pathetic now - I feel I ought to have jumped up and legged it, or whipped out a Bible and begun an exorcism. At the very least, I should have screamed the hotel down. But believe me, when you're faced with something like that, you become a six-year-old child again, convinced that if you can't see it, it won't hurt you. Eventually, I risked a quick peek. The room was dark, the air was cold after the warmth under the covers, but nothing seemed amiss. I poked my whole head out. Nothing. I reached out and switched the light on. I was alone. The room looked the same as it had done before I went to bed. The ceiling above me was just a ceiling. I looked at my watch. It was 3am. Suffice to say, I didn't get much sleep between then and breakfast at eight. I kept the light on, as well.

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The next morning I wasted little time in describing the events of the previous night to my two companions. Why, I don't know, because it was patently obvious that all I'd succeed in doing was to give them yet more "comedy" ammunition. And yes, I was wearing my zip-up top again. Oh, the jokes flowed free and fast that day as we played our way around the hotel's golf course. But, as night began to fall, a decision was made. We would all wait up in my room that night, to see if my visitor returned.

We spent the evening in the bar, enjoying the last vestiges of the hotel staff's Christmas spirit before our return home the next day. Then, armed with a dozen cans of lager, we bade our fellow guests goodnight and went

to perform our secret vigil.

It was gone one by the time we turned off the television and decided we should get serious about the situation. Brendan was a big fan of *Most Haunted*, so it was he who suggested the three of us should sit around the room's small round occasional table, and try and create a bit of atmosphere by turning the big light off.

For a while we discussed this and that (usually with some reference to my impending bus pass, or a request for me to hand out the Werther's Originals - this was a rich vein of comedy my companions were prepared to mine to its full extent). Then the story turned to weird experiences we had had. I re-recounted my vision of "Spaghetti Head" (as it had become known). Lewis told us - for the umpteenth time - how he'd avoided "certain death" a couple of weeks before when he'd stopped to tie his shoelace, only for a scaffolding pole to fall from the building work above and shatter the paving stone in front of him with the force of its impact. Brendan recalled how a psychic had told him that his grandma Celia was watching over him as they spoke - which would have come as a surprise to his very-much-alive grandmas Doreen and Hilda.

This was having no effect at all, so Brendan suggested we try a spot of "table tipping". We suggested he stop watching *Most Haunted* and get out more, but decided to humour him. All three of us sat around the table, with our fingers pressed onto the surface. Brendan started speaking to the room.

"If you're there, Spaghetti Head, we would love to see you. Show yourself. Please."

I wasn't sure that all this begging was particularly seemly, but Brendan insisted that it was what they did on the show. It was then that Lewis piped up.

"Never mind table tipping, perhaps we should get Clive here to roll his cap for old Spaghetti Head. Perhaps he doesn't recognise you with that cardie on. Thinks you're Ken Barl-"

He never finished his sentence, as it was at that point that the table ripped itself from under our hands and shot across the room, smashing into the tiny sideboard and sending the lamp - our one source of illumination - crashing onto the floor, the bulb shattering.

The darkness that swept over us was instant and total. For a second there was complete silence, none of us quite believing what had just happened. A wave of coldness swept over me as I sat there in the dark. Then I heard Lewis - it must have been Lewis - give a strange, strangled whimper. There was movement to my right as Brendan - always the more practical of our little group, got to his feet and began to search around for a lamp or a light switch, banging into things and swearing as he went. I couldn't move. I had visions of Spaghetti Head, somewhere in the dark,

ready to pounce. With a cry of triumph, Brendan flicked a switch and a beam of light cut through the gloom. He'd managed to find his rucksack, and in it, the plastic torch he'd got in his cracker during Christmas lunch. The light it provided was dim and yellow, but it was enough to illuminate the whole room. The upturned table. Brendan, his face pale, his eyes wide and scared-looking. Lewis, still seated to my right. And behind him, the enormous figure which had its hands clamped across his eyes.

It was huge, towering above us in the room, bent double under the ceiling. It was dressed in dirty black robes which seemed to disappear into the shadows cast by the dim torch bulb. Its head was down low and partially obscured by Lewis's. It was almost as though it was whispering something into his ear. Beneath the long, bony fingers of the creature's hands, my friend's mouth was open in a wide, silent scream.

The torch beam was sending crazy shadows zig zagging across the room as Brendan fought to keep it steady in his shaking hands. As I watched, the huge thing that filled the room behind the captive Lewis began to look up at me. I just caught sight of a shining black eyeball before Brendan dropped the torch and the cheap plastic toy hit the carpeted floor, spilling out its battery and once again plunging us into darkness. I heard a dry rustle and a thud, felt cold air waft past my face as something moved in the blackness. Someone was screaming. I realised it was me.

I have no recollection of what happened after that. Neither has Brendan. All we know is that we were woken by a tremendous kerfuffle in the room. The lights were back on and people were standing over us, muttering and barking orders about telephones and ambulances. Someone wrapped a blanket around me. I opened my eyes and saw Lewis's lifeless body crumpled on the floor.

They say it was a heart attack - a strange thing for an apparently healthy 25 year old to suffer, but not unheard of. These things happen, they say. A prank gone wrong, they mutter. But Brendan and I know better. And I know best of all. Spaghetti Head wasn't a ghost, it was a warning of what was to come. A face, contorted in terrible fear, the eyes there, but hidden from view. Obscured by a pair of pale, fleshless hands. And if the owner of those hands came for Lewis, why shouldn't it come for me? After all, it has seen me now, it knows what I look like. The next time, I fear, there will be no warning.

(c) Christopher Wood 2005

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BEGGARS BANQUET

By James Stanger

IT was very late, the static on the TV screen told Calvin that. Half buried in take away foil containers, Calvin emerged from the mess of his curries and week old fried chicken boxes.

He stood silent for a moment.

Calvin's weary eyes crossed his cold dark bed-sit. On his left Calvin could see the thrashing white light of the television screen. It made his eyes hurt. The screen went blank as he pressed the button and everything was silent, much like his state of mind.

Stroking his overgrown stubble, he exhaled a deep yawn and picked up his binoculars from his threadbare floor.

"Time to research the civilians."

Through a half open window of his third floor bed-sit he could see the living city. A Friday night, with everyone out to celebrate that they were free from the toils of work for a couple of days.

"Work for weeks, spend in days," Calvin muttered to himself.

Calvin understood the work and play theory - to play you had to pay. Money was too much of a curse, hell-bent on your destruction. Calvin never cared for money because money never cared too much for him, and as for lady luck she never smiled sweetly upon him, but instead spat acidic venom.

Dusting clean the binocular lenses, he spied down to the grubby existence of the city's dwellers, some sprawling out of pubs and clubs in an unarranged stringy manner, others waiting, dressed up and in queues outside the same clubs people were being ejected from.

The night was chilled and empty, reflecting the hearts of its people.

"Here's one for compassion," Calvin yelled.

He downed the final bitter traces of whiskey from his Bells bottle.

Now he could see them, forgotten and shivering, the poor hungry street rats in different stages of death. Some sitting in shop enclaves sleeping, while the loud crowds roared by. Others begging for money with hands outstretched. Then there were those tramps that drank themselves numb. Usually they were old and the instigators and recipients of violence and abuse.

"None should be on the streets," Calvin thought while clenching his teeth.

Tonight was going to be another night for deliverance Calvin pulled on his t-shirt, then his musty smelling white shirt. He pulled on his crumpled and stained corduroy trouser before donning his jacket.

Calvin paused...

For a moment he caught his image in the mirror. He felt along his unshaven angular jaw line and peered over his body. Even with his clothes on, Calvin could see he had retained a reasonable shape - slightly muscular and a large frame.

His dark hair was clearly thinning and receding from the sides - age could not be halted. Dark lines drew themselves under his eyes like limp cobwebs in an abandoned attic space. Calvin's gaunt stare was the centrepiece for his grim face.

Calvin knew that his reflection was really a shadow of his former self. He drew a breath, drawn inwards by the strings of melancholy deep in his heart.

Before he had any more time to think he made a fast exit out of the door. In the fresh night air Calvin refused to be drawn into the dark caverns of his mind.

The first thing to hit Calvin once in the open was the grinding oppression of the streets, the heavy and treating beat of the modern world. The cities high streets filled with the faceless many exploding into conversation swearing, shouting, and boasting.

BULLSHIT!!

All of it. Not a word of truth or worth was uttered, and none of the speakers and gnashers of teeth would be capable of it anyway. Calvin could also sense the unwelcome verve of violence tonight. If people did not have a reason for conflict they would make up an excuse to introduce each other to the local hospital.

It wasn't long before Calvin found him, it wasn't that this individual was picked by choice, it was due to the fact that this wretch was the first one to cross Calvin's path. Buried deep in the darkness of the entrance of Iceland supermarket, the bag of bones shivered, clutching himself while he tried to find some comfort on the frozen concrete ground. The stiff bitter air ripped into Calvin's bones – invisible, but keener than any blade.

Calvin approached the withering vagrant and tapped him on the shoulder gently.

"WHAT!...the fuckin' pigs 'innit! Piss off! I'm not moving' on for you," the vagrant snapped at Calvin, keeping his eyes shut all the while.

"Don't worry son, it's not the police. I just come to ask you something".

"What?"

"Look, it's freezing out here and I was wondering if you need a bed for the night?"

Calvin made his proposition and for a moment there was a frozen silence.

"Are you some kind of kind of pervert, mate?"

The silence thawed.

The homeless man raised himself into a sitting position, opening his eyes now and on his guard, shaking all the time. This was a reaction Calvin had become used to - he also knew how to handle people like this when the need arose. He continued with another line of questioning.

"Okay, then let me introduce myself. My name is Calvin Vickery. I used to serve in the armed forces. I used to fight against this kind of tragedy"

"What kind of tragedy?"

The Vagrant seemed indifferent to Calvin's personal crusade, but seemed to calm his former sharpness.

"Well, the homeless y'know, the rich bleeding the rest of us out of existence, the government allowing people to die on the streets while everyone else sleeps tightly in their police protected mansions."

"Been homeless yourself then?"

"No..."

"Then you don't have any idea what it's like out here then do you. So if you could piss off now, I'm trying to sleep!"

"If you let me finish - I was going to say 'no, but the flat where I live is about to be repossessed by the land lord, and in about a week I'll be out on the streets too'."

Calvin said his piece, waiting for the reaction.

"Okay...? So what has that got to do with me then?"

"Well I don't get any visitors, even less friends... I escaped my family when I was a boy, I need some company and when I am on the streets I am going to need a bit of help. You could settle down at my digs for a bit, at least it will be warm there, and I can feed you and maybe in return you could help me out here".

The homeless man relaxed his posture a little, slightly more willing to listen to Calvin now. Maybe this wasn't such a bad idea really, he thought to himself.

"Sorry mate for being a bit nasty back then, but its second nature out here. You can't be soft skinned or soft headed. Nobody is giving you any breaks here."

"Well, what about the one I'm giving you?" Calvin replied.

"Alright...okay you're on. It'll give my back a break from concrete at least."

For the first time the homeless man smiled.

"Well what are you waiting for get up, Collect your stuff and well get something to eat and have a good night."

Calvin grinned sharply, the shadows teased around his face as if to disguise the smile.

"The names Mart."

The two shook hands and walked away from the shopping centre. Mart found it hard to walk at first because of the pins and needles, but Calvin stopped him from falling by grasping him under the arms. They continued to walk onward with Calvin steadying Marts progress. Calvin walked on the darkened side of the path, away from any possibility of being identified by passers by or traffic. It was obvious that Mart was weak and frail far beyond his years, the sheer struggle just to stay alive had taken its toll on him physically and mentally. He was a wreck of a man, like the burnt out carcass of a stolen car.

The two arrived at Calvin's front door - Mart looked around slightly confused, he had only walked a small distance, yet Calvin seemed to live in a part of town that he had not seen before. Mart thought he knew Hammersmith inside and out he then recalled nodding off a couple of times during the journey and Calvin carrying him part of the way. Maybe we are further out than I thought, Mart pondered.

Calvin barged the mean spirited door open, inside the fluorescent tube lighting flickered, completely failing to light the foyer. The tile flooring with its black and white mosaic with pitted with cracks and missing tiles a tragedy of design and under investment, the wallpaper like flayed skin, the musty air that made Mart choke, caused by the creeping damp that crawled up the walls. Calvin twisted and fiddled the keys in his lock and finally got his door open.

"Okay Mart, in you go mate - I'll get the heaters on and we can warm up a bit," Calvin said.

Once inside, Calvin pursed his lips, placing one index finger over them to signal silence towards Mart. Then came the noises.

BANG BANG BANG!

"Calvin Vickery, I know you're in there! I heard the door slam!"

The two remained still, freezing silence holding them hostage.

"Calvin! Behaving like this won't do you any favours. I am gonna see you chucked out on your arse next Friday!"

The landlord's footsteps retreated from Calvin's door and down the stairs, leaving Calvin and Mart staring at each other.

"Don't sound to happy, does he mate?" Martin told Calvin.

"It's alright, I'll leave that bastard something to remember me by."

Switching on the lights, Calvin was comforted with the radiating heat of the room and was happy that they at least were going to eat tonight. "Welcome to the Ritz."

Marts eyes were greeted with a room stripped naked of furniture, save for a sole wooden chair and mattress in the far right corner of the room. The floor was completely plastered in litter, discarded wrappers, Coke cans, tins, beer bottles, take away cartons.

In the parts of the floor where carpet was visible, insects could be seen

crawling to and fro, from mound of rubbish to mound of rubbish, commuting from home to home like a tiny society living and breathing.

There didn't appear to be any space for Mart to sleep. Although outside was colder, at least his spot outside the shopping center was *clean.*

Calvin had disappeared into the kitchen, and Mart could hear him chopping vegetables and filling a pan with water.

Mart sat down on the chair rather than sit down on the filthy carpet. Clutching his face in his hands he felt all his grim past grind and crunch in both mind and body. He dwelled on his failures, the things he could have done and the paths he'd never walked. When your dad tells you your future will end behind bars why bother being anything else.

Why bother at all?

His teens had been filled with cheap fixes and petty crimes until his 20th birthday, when his dad had had a skinful and gate crashed his party. Mart remembered how his dad came in shouting, swearing, scaring his mum - eyes bloodshot, full of rage and bitter hate. Hate that stretched further back than Marts own life, and before all of poor mums bruises and cracked ribs. That day something seemed to have snapped in dads mind, the rusty barbed wire that prevented his dad from really unleashing his rage was sliced by invisible bolt cutters. The older man yelled something about respect and being a man, and cracked mums cheek bone with one cruel act of violence.

He stood over her, yelling, spitting, clutching a bottle of cider, he stood over mum assaulting her with brutal and vile insults. Mart recalled standing in horror watching his mum lay there, whimpering begging his dad to stop crying for mercy as the blood ran from her nose after another punch to her face landed.

The next memory was a blur - all Mart remembered was picking up the screwdriver and hammering it into dads bald head. Blood mixed with tears and Marts memory vanished.

From there he just recalled running in utter fear and breathless awe, never stopping and never remaining too long in one place.

The pot boiled and bubbled, letting off wisps of steam. The odour seeped its way into the living room. Marts mouth moistened with the promise of real hot food, of the chance to taste something that had not been found cold and discarded in a bin or rotting somewhere.

Calvin called towards Martin from the kitchen. "Come out here and talk to me."

Mart stood up, unsure as to what Calvin meant. He slowly walked from the living room and into the kitchen frowning.

"Something on your mind, Mart?"

Mart didn't reply automatically, he was too naturally guarded with his

words and letting out information to strangers was against his nature, even ones that let you stay at their house for nothing. Calvin seemed nice but Mart was sure as to what he was getting at.

"You can't run away from your problems, Mart."

Mart recoiled. Somehow, Calvin had seen something in him, had drawn something out of him within just a few hours of knowing him.

"Please...don't feel insulted. It's just...well I never believe in running away from trouble. I am a great believer in confronting problems and destroying them"

Mart frowned and stayed silent. He felt nervous and edgy, there was something about Calvin that worried him. The man seemed okay, but his words carried slight menace. Both men were suspended in silence, as if that was the way it was supposed to be for those few prickly seconds.

"Martin I never asked...are you a vegetarian?" Calvin's voice had an unnaturally jovial pitch.

Martin replied in the negative.

"In that case I can beef this stew up. I don't think we would get very far with just a few veggies in the pot, would we?"

Calvin didn't seem to notice the state he was living in. It reminded Martin of a crack house where he used to squat. The place was riven with scum and vermin, it was risky lying down in case you were pricked by a used syringe or bitten by a starving rat. One hot May afternoon he realised he could smell something hideous and noticed several bloated rats scurry in and out the door to the bathroom. When Martin finally shouldered the door open, his stomach dropped and his breakfast rose. Before his eyes was the decaying remains of a teenage girl. A crack pipe was in the sink and a syringe plunged into the lips of her vagina.

Martin ran from that place, images of hair peeling from her scalp and patches of wirey black hair invaded his mind as he pounded the street. The sunken dead eyes starring blankly at him as if it knew him and rats, maggots, fly and god knows what else eating her dead flesh.

"Eh, mate - you went all catatonic on me again. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's okay. Seriously, nothing."

"If you say so. I gotta get this beef cut up."

Calvin rattled a resistant draw it clattered and sounded if it was about to break, then suddenly it opened. Calvin reached inside and pulled out a single large bladed carving knife. The blade was powerful and clean. Calvin rested his eyes upon it as if it was the only precious thing in the whole flat. He examined the precision of the edge and the unblemished shine of the stainless steel.

"Calvin, what the hell is that for?"

"Cutting the meat." Calvin smiled as he spoke.

"What are we having, bleeding walrus steaks?"

Calvin frowned and smiled an empty smile. He turned around to open the fridge to take out the meat they were going to eat with the stew.

Martin stared.

The fridge was unplugged. And it was completely empty.

"Check the stew, will ya mate?"

Hesitantly, Martin turned towards the piping hot stew. He was worried about Calvin now. He had turned from an angel of mercy to something else.

"It looks fine to me, Calvin"

"Hehehe... use that spoon on the side and give it a good stir. Make sure nothing has stuck to the bottom. I hate uncooked veggies"

Martin moved his hand carefully towards the spoon on the draining board, all the while watching Calvin hunched over the empty fridge. He watched as Calvin hunted around the cavity of the refrigerator, pretending to reach out for something, his hands miming as if it was busy handling and gathering.

Martin didn't want Calvin to catch sight of him looking. A sense of unease crept up on him and coiled around his heart. Martin looked down at the boiling water, stirring the vegetables but thinking about the crazy antics of the man beside him… afraid of what he was about to do next.

He felt the crushing grip of Calvin's hand around the nape of his neck. Calvin was forcing Martins face down, towards the boiling water. He cried out in surprise.

"The vegetables sometimes get stuck... didn't you hear, STUCK. At the bottom of the pan. You have to check, we don't want crunchy veggies"

Calvin applied more pressure to Martins neck, grimacing wildly as he did so. With each second Martins face edged ever closer to the furious froth of the water he could feel it starting to burn his skin the bubbles formed and then burst at the skin upon his face.

Martins' nose touched the water the pain shoot into his nerve endings and reported back to his brain. He screamed in panic and pain, the horrific turn of events was too much for his mind to understand.

Martin's forehead slammed against the bottom of the saucepan, his entire head devoured by the boiling tempest inside the pan.

"That's it Mart, take a good long look 'cause supper is almost ready," Calvin giggled. "All we require now is the meat, and for that you will come in very handy."

With that, Calvin relinquished his grasp on Martins head and a split second afterwards the now crimson mask that was Martins face came firing upwards like a rifle salute.

Eyes wild and screaming, mouth open gasping silently in the throws of unearthly physical horror, Martin lunged at Calvin.

Calvin chuckled and artfully dodged the simple attack and in response swiftly cut Martin down with the keen blade of the carving knife, slashing his torso in a precision diagonal cut. Martin collapsed to the floor in a crumpled heap convulsing and shivering.

"Oh Mart, you're going to make terrific stock, and even better gravy...mmmm."

Unable to move, Mart was reduced to watching Calvin dice and slice him. The last scene he witnessed was the insane grin on Calvin's face as he ground his flesh. Calvin glared at Martin's dying eyes and made sure Martin saw how happy he made him.

After cleaning the kitchen with a whistle and song, Calvin settled down to sleep amongst his nest of rioting food and scurrying insects.

Morning came sharply, its rays filtering through the broken blinds unto Calvin's sloppy drooling face. He was deep in slumber. A tiny cockroach started to explore Calvin's face, pattering its miniature feet around Calvin's right cheek stopping for a moment then crawling to the edge of his right nostril. Calvin's eyes flipped open like saloon doors, the strength of the sun made him suddenly squint. He shook the cockroach off with one swipe and crushed it underfoot.

"Well, that's what I get for laying in crap."

Calvin then walked over to the kitchen area and started preparing small cling filmed parcels of Martins minced flesh. Later on in the afternoon Calvin spent what little money he had on a cheap bottle of bourbon, a bottle of German Riesling, burger buns and a bag of assorted salad.

It was early evening by the time he returned back to his flat, and this meant he had to make the last preparations Calvin swept the huge mountain of rubbish into several smaller heaps of rubbish.

He then put on a pair of rubber gloves and started throwing the refuge away into bin liners. After which Calvin disinfected the floor and then sprayed it again with strong smelling insecticides. He swept up the dead and dying insect carrion from the floor, unfolded his old camping table placed it in the middle of the room, then covered the top with a crisped checkered pattern table cloth.

He then went to the kitchen, took out one of the meat parcels and started molding it into a burger shape, adding small chunks of chopped onion as he went.

He came out of the kitchen, wiped himself clean and went outside to where he had first found Martin sheltered in the shop doorway. Outside the shopping centre Calvin spotted a young woman sobbing desperately into her hands. Curiously, Calvin approached her.

"What's up love?"

"He's gone...he has fucking gone."

"Who?"

"My boyfriend..."

The girl looked up with large tired brown eyes. She shook, and asked with a hint of a plea: "Who are you, anyway?"

The girl must have only been around 19. Her face was pretty and delicate, but bruised. Her lips were cracked and bleeding slighty, her hair although dark was invaded by grey hairs.

"Me... my name is Calvin. I used to talk to a guy who slept in this area... a guy called Mart."

"Yeah... yeah, that's him. He's my boyfriend"

The girl's eyes lit up with the expectation of a small child on Christmas Eve.

"I took him in last night he was in such a bad way... I thought it wou...

"Brilliant. I... that's so great"

The girl collapsed in Calvin's arms a quivering wreck. She felt as if she had found her angel of mercy. Calvin felt that the girl had no strength in her limbs to do much walking.

Calvin grabbed her and stopped the girl from falling flat on her face he support her weight with his strong arms until she was able to stand on her own again.

"What was wrong with him then?"

"He had been set upon by a gang of thugs he was in no fit state to stay outside"

"Didn't you take him to hospital?"

"He really didn't want to go, he said he hated the places"

The girl frowned. She couldn't recall a time when Mart had any issue with hospitals. Quite the opposite, he used to joke with her at the fact that it was a good way of getting a bed for the night.

"Yeah well... if you say so… Calvin. Oh my names Ruth, just so you know"

Calvin smiled he felt he was making a connection with the girl, but she wasn't an idiot. He knew he would have to watch what he said, and did if he was to accomplish what he had in mind.

The rich orange horizon settled itself on the city as the sun retreated wearily down below the high rise tower blocks of the town, allowing the darker shades of night to seep into the day. By the time Calvin and Ruth reached Calvin's flat the heavens had turned purple and dark blue. It was around half past nine and the twilight chill had started to course through the air.

When the couple finally arrived at the flat Calvin hurried Ruth inside his apartment, not wishing to be seen by his landlord. The building was silent and dark.

"Okay, here we are"

The atmosphere was still and solemn. Ruth heard the door shut behind her with a clunk. Calvin stood by it and smiled. Ruth smiled back weakly, she couldn't see any sign of Martin anywhere.

"Where is he?"

"Oh he won't be long, he's just gone out to fetch a few things for our meal tonight"

"Meal?"

"Yes I thought you guys would be hungry so I thought it would be nice to have something to eat in the warm for a change"

Ruth frowned. Something didn't add up. Calvin and her had met by chance, how did he know that Martin had a partner?

"What do you mean Calvin? We only met a little while ago"

"Oh yeah, he told me about you. Said he had a girlfriend, said he would come and find you while he popped out, so I thought it would be best to cook for three"

"Oh I see. Sorry, it's just it's just been so horrible today"

Ruth was close to tears again as she spoke the day had ravaged her resolve emotional exhaustion twined with physical wear was taking its toll. Calvin smiled at her, stroking her hair back as if she were a child. The touch would have been a source of comfort and reassurance for Ruth if it wasn't for his icy fingers and unsettling grin.

"Look, sit by the table and I will cook you some of my home made burgers. I promise Martin will be back soon. In the meantime just rest up and get something in your belly, okay?"

Calvin walked into the kitchen and started unwrapping the parcels of mince, putting them into the frying pan. After a short time they began to sizzle and brown on one side. The smell of meat being fried began to sway in the air and aroused Ruth, who had fallen asleep at the table. Sensations of hunger stung deep in her belly. She suddenly realised how hungry she had become, how it was a long time since anybody had cooked her a meal. She allowed herself to smile. Maybe she was just being too defensive. Calvin might be an okay guy, she told herself. Momentarily Martin slipped her thoughts and they were replaced with the idea of food and nourishment for the first time in a long while.

Ruth stood up and walked towards the window to see if there was any sign of Martin, but it was too dark to make anything out. Most of the street lights weren't working, which left only the headlights of passing traffic to illuminate the area below her.

"How long have we been waiting Calvin?" She asked. She was getting anxious again to see her lover. They had never been separated for long before, it was one of the few promises in life that had been fulfilled in her whole tearful existence.

"About 40 minutes, I think," said Calvin. "Look, I know you're think-

ing of Martin but he is going to be here any minute. Just sit back down and enjoy what I'm cooking... please."

Ruth reluctantly sat back down in her seat, crossing legs and placing her elbows on the table. She tried to stop the awful thoughts from creeping into her mind of where he was and what happened to him.

She remembered that a few years back they had tried to hitchhike up to Manchester to see if they could make a clean break. They managed to get a lift to Luton from a group of teenagers in a camper van going to holiday.

However when they went to carry on from Luton they found themselves being ignored and Ruth thought that if she tried by herself to pick up a lift she would have more success than the two of them standing by the road side.

It was a dangerous idea - five minutes after she stared to hail for a lift a bronze hatchback pulled over. At first she was relieved that someone had stopped. As Ruth approached the car with Martin following she saw the driver get out the vehicle. He grabbed her and tried to bundle her into the back seat.

In the back was another man. He grabbed Ruth by the legs and started to drag her in the back of the car Martin ran to help but a vicious blow to the head knocked him out. The car wasn't driven far before they stopped again. After being punched, kicked and violated she was pushed out of the car - naked but alive. Ruth then spent the next few minutes searching the field for Martin imagining him dead.

Ruth pushed the disturbing images out of her mind the past fading, as nauseous as it always had been.

Calvin came back into the room with Ruth's meal.

"Here we go, you must be *starving*."

He placed the plate under Ruth's nose. It was a hamburger, juicy and plump garnished with salad and with tomato sauce oozing from the burger bun. Ruth smiled thinly, even with worry gnawing at her she needed to eat, and without wasting anytime she began taking great mouthfuls of the hamburger.

She chomped and chewed great chunks of the meat the juice dribbling down her chin. Her cheeks became greasy with the fat.

Ruth didn't stop consuming the burger until she had finished it all. Her stomach had been crying out for hot food for a long time - she couldn't hide her greed or indeed think of social graces.

When Ruth had finished the meal Calvin grinned and glared at Ruth. It was the kind of look that caused familiar feelings inside her stomach, and this time it wasn't hunger.

"Did you enjoy that Ruth?"

He crossed his fingers together and his smile became wide and mis-

chievous, like a folk-lore crocodile waiting to snap its steely jaws.

"Yes. It was great, thank you."

"Did it... did it taste familiar?"

"Familiar... it was a beef burger? I know it's been a long time, but they always taste the same."

"Beef you say..."

Calvin chuckled at a private joke, and as he did picked up a carrier bag that was tucked between his feet under the table. He stood up and walked behind Ruth.

"You see, the meat you just eaten is… oh so fresh."

"That's good, isn't it?" Ruth asked, unsure of the tone in his voice.

"Well yes, for me it is - but for you ...well you may see it it in another light my dear.".

Ruth frowned, perplexed by Calvin. She could tell there was something cryptic in his words, a dark puzzle.

"First of all, let me give you a tooth pick for those little bits between your teeth, *sweetheart.*"

He reached over Ruth, his warm breath blew against her cheek as a lover would as a prelude to a kiss. He placed a closed fist unto the table top, then opened his hand. Withdrawing his arm he left the item that he held on the table, in full view of Ruth.

It was an index finger, complete with Martins ring. Ruth's eyes widened as the unspeakable truth of Martins fate became clear.

"..Oh my... fucking Go..."

Ruth didn't get to finish her sentence, as her words were muffled by the rich cascading vomit that bolted out of her mouth. She tried to stem it with her hand and slid from the chair onto her knees.

"I think you have made a bit of a mess of my carpet, Ruth."

Ruth tried to cower back away from Calvin, petrified, the bellowing terrors flooding her consciousness. It was easy for Calvin to block Ruth's feeble escape attempt. He stepped over her and kicked her stomach viciously, again and again.

Calvin wrapped the table cloth tightly around Ruth's head to prevent any sounds of screaming or shouting. Her death would be as silent as he could be able to make it.

Forcing the girl to lie on her back, Calvin sat on her stomach, making her vomit even more. She squirmed and wriggled desperately, but Calvin's strength overpowered her.

Chocking on her burning sick and fear, Ruth's arms scratched at the air in the last attempts to fight off Calvin, but it was futile. Finally her feverish breathing died down as her lungs were starved of oxygen.

Calvin noticed Ruth had become a corpse. He relinquished his grip mopping his brow calmly with the sleeve of his shirt, he grinned to him-

self. Now he had to clean up and dispose of the body.

Two Weeks later....

Calvin found a half empty can of cider. It wasn't food, but it did an okay job in stopping the stomachs brain remembering what is was there for. He had been stumbling around for weeks now, the landlord had finally had enough and Calvin's life now consisted of scratching around old London for food and drink. He watched his town - it was still a festering scab of ignorance and nihilism as far as he was concerned.

Most of all he hated THEM, despite being now being one of THEM - sleeping in shop doorways, washing in public toilets, being buggered in bushes by vodka pickled tramps.

Calvin sat outside a closed down shop enclave and sipped the rancid cider, picking through the discarded dog ends to find something worth smoking.

Clutching his stomach in pain, the wave of hunger struck once more but this time it was desperate. If he didn't find something soon he would be too weak to move and probably starve to death.

Then a face came into view... a spark of recognition - it was an old man that Ruth spoke to when he saw her for the very first time. The man often slept in the park and was about fifty, unshaven, wearing a grey anorak with a half chewed trilby hat.

The man squinted at the weak looking Calvin and spoke

"The names Benny. You look in a bad way"

"Y...Yeah," Calvin replied. "I am fucking starvin'"

"Well come out mate, we got a bit of a feast going on under the bridge - with a bit of booze n'all."

Benny picked Calvin up from the pavement and started walking with him to the bridge, offering a whisky bottle as they walked.

Calvin tried to sip it, but his stomach rebelled. It wasn't going to allow Calvin to drink anything until it had some food inside it.

"Don't worry mate, have it later. Plenty more where that came from"

From that moment on a calm numb haze transcended Calvin's mind. He first felt a disembodied feeling, after that he couldn't hear anything. Then all there was ...was darkness.

Calvin's eyes flicked open. He was under Hammersmith Bridge there were lots of tramps and beggars - some he recognised, some he didn't. He lay paralysed on the ground. Around him, everyone was eating, greedily chewing and gorging on something. Calvin looked down and Benny's eyes looked back, his mouth full of Calvin's wet shiny intestines.

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THEY THAT DWELL IN DARK PLACES

*By **Daniel McGachey***

THE evening had long since drifted into night and the talk in our corner of the Club's Smoking Room was as animated as it had been when we began, over an excellent meal in the Supper Room. Our topic, unsurprising given that this was All Hallow's Eve, was that which might be deemed the supernatural.

There is a tradition of reciting frightening stories around the fireside, huddled in the warmth and light, while the shadows dance and the icy fingers of chill lurk just inches away. This was one such occasion where tradition was being more than fully observed. It had begun with a discussion of the various superstitions which once held sway in less enlightened times and whose influences could even now be seen in such business as the lighting of lanterns to ward off evil spirits.

There had been an air of joviality about our chatter, almost an edge of contempt in our laughter, when we imagined the common man of the middle ages watching the flickering candlelight throwing grotesque shadows upon the walls and casting furtive glances into the dark, fearful of seeing some "other" thing lurking there.

Naturally, as things often transpire under the effects of a heavy feed and a glass or two of brandy, our company soon found itself in a form of competition, each fellow attempting to recall the most alarming and blood curdling ghost story he could remember. There was more laughter as familiar legends unfolded, of skeletal horses charging through the night under the whip of a headless coachman, or of foolish virgin brides being saved from a fate worse than death by the return of phantom first wives, interrupting the wedding ceremony to point a pale, accusing finger at their blackguard husbands and announcing, "That is the man who murdered me!"

This contest, with each storyteller trying to top the previous man's effort in grisly detail, had continued throughout dessert and had followed us into the Games Room, where, over billiards, Anstruther had finished off his tale of an ancient bell in a forbidden tower which only rang to signify the death of a member of the local landowner's family. He spoke of the landowner's resolution to remove it from its tower. Of how the bell had tolled, even as he was unfastening it from its beam, and both he and the bell had plunged to oblivion at the base of the tower. "And, despite the bell having been broken up, these many years, and melted down or lost," asserted Anstruther, "it is reckoned still to this day, that when one of that man's heirs is facing their last moments on this earth, there can still be heard a mournful chiming emanating from that empty tower."

Over a few more frames, we savoured descriptions of monstrous scarecrows constructed of more than mere straw and sacking and an account of a portrait that wept blood. Later, as we settled down for a hand of cards, Marston, losing heavily, regaled us with a pointed piece concerning a private gambling club, its meetings taking place in secret and ever-changing locations, to which entry was by select invitation only and where to lose was to forfeit a far higher toll than mere money.

From thence, we had decanted to the Smoking Room, with its welcoming fire, the comforting creak of leather armchairs and the familiar scent of pipe tobacco and old books. Settled in such inviting surroundings, with the cold October gloom held at bay outside, our conversation proceeded pleasantly, though the tales had grown in their baroque grandeur.

With each subsequent account adding yet one more graveyard apparition or night time visitant, one more curse or secret chamber or nameless thing that lurked and gibbered in dark corners, the stories had become so ridiculously overburdened with uncanny events that any inkling of dread that may have begun to gather had dissipated into a warm atmosphere of knowing grins and whispered ironies, while ghost upon ghoul upon apparition were heaped into the mixture for our enjoyment.

"My friends," said I, lighting a cigar on a hot coal plucked from the fire with a pair of tongs, "Your descriptions of these charnel house depredations have been so thorough, I feel as though I have been on a walking holiday around every churchyard and mausoleum in the country."

Davenport, a sly glint in his eye, prodded my not inconsiderable stomach and announced, "A walking holiday? That is the most fanciful notion yet put forward tonight! Why, I've never known you to walk further than from the supper table to that sofa and back again!"

I took the jibe and the laughter it provoked in good spirit but added, in a mock serious tone, "Whereas you, my dear Davenport, I have never yet seen *able* to walk after your usual intake of port."

Our merriment brought a few cold stares from some of the older members, seated at the far end of the room. But we were not to be put out. If they craved silence, there was a well-stocked library on the next floor, where they could while away an eternity without so much as hearing a single word uttered.

As my attention returned from these frosty old troopers to my own group, I felt Anstruther nudge lightly at my arm and he whispered to me, "I've just realised that one of our number is not joining in with our mirth. Nor indeed, I am suddenly aware, has he spoken one word since we left our places at the dining table."

The companion to whom he referred was a young man, younger than myself at any rate, named Ashbourne. A year or so previously when I had

first joined the club, he had been introduced to me as a lawyer with a successful career ahead of him. But, all these months later, it appeared to one and all that his successful career must still be ahead of him somewhere, if it had not bypassed him utterly. Indeed, he had of late become so distracted in manner that I had good reason to suspect that the reasoned arguments of a successful trial might be almost entirely beyond his capabilities. Something, clearly, had been weighing on him, for, though he made no mention of any matter which might be pressing, he was growing more drawn and haggard, while his clothing was becoming increasingly threadbare.

Anstruther was not alone in spotting the quiet member of our party. "What say you, Ashbourne?" enquired Marston, in that booming voice of his that made everyone turn at once to look at our silent companion. "Or, more aptly, what *don't* say you, since you have been as quiet as the tomb all evening."

"Again with tombs and graveyard terrors," asked Bayliss, clearly sensing the unfortunate Ashbourne's unease at being brought centre stage and, trying to draw attention from him once more. "Tell us again, that tale of the anatomist who began his grim work only to discover that the unlawfully procured cadaver he was carving was, in fact, his own beloved daughter."

But it was not Marston, who had previously told this yarn with hand-wringing glee, who answered, but Ashbourne, who had found his voice at last. "Why do you seek such horrors? Why is it only the morbid and the unnatural that brings you such pleasure? What joy is there to be found, dwelling in such dark places and upon such dark matters?" His face was pale and livid, while his body seemed almost to be quivering with a quiet inner rage as he spoke the question. "And what do you know of horror, any of you?"

Our group was stilled for a moment or two, provoking a murmur of satisfaction from one of those elderly relics who had shown such dismay at our earlier jollity. It must be said that, among us, we numbered some very prominent men, most in comfortable middle age, some of us older, some younger. But these were responsible men with a degree of power. Therefore, it was a considerable shock to the system to be so upbraided by a man of Ashbourne's relatively junior years and position. I could sense that one or other of my fellows, Harlstane, perhaps or, more likely, the hot-tempered Wickstaffe, was summoning up the rage to respond with an oath or a threat. Thus it was that I interjected myself, striving to add a trace of good humour, which I believed might defuse the situation. "We certainly did not aim to offend or upset your sensibilities in any way, Ashbourne. In fact, the only persons with cause for outrage would be the authors of Penny Dreadfuls, over the wholesale plundering of their sto-

rylines."

"This is no joking matter," he told me, unnecessarily. One look into his eyes had been enough to make that point clear.

"In the name of the prophet," Wickstaffe thundered, his round face almost becoming as red as that shocking hair of his. "If the beggar doesn't care for the chatter, why doesn't he shoo away, eh? No-one's forcin' you to keep company with us, laddie!"

Ashbourne lowered his eyes before replying, "But I must keep some company. I cannot be alone. I am being…" Here, he stopped, clearly pulling himself up short, some final word or other being held back, either out of shame or fear. When he looked up once more, his tone had changed. "Gentlemen, I owe you all an apology and an apology you shall have. I had entirely no right in speaking up against you so and I ask for your forgiveness."

To their credit, each man nodded his assent, with mumbled entreaties to "think no more on the matter" and assertions that "such things are commonplace" and that it was "all perfectly understandable." Yet it was clear from their altered expressions as they regarded Ashbourne, that they did not understand his outburst at all. But that understanding was soon to come.

"The lad has an interesting point, don't you think?" rumbled Wickstaffe, now fully calm. "All this talk of spooks and shades is a bit of a queer business, in my book."

I rose and wandered over to the tall window that looked out onto the park beyond. The streetlamps were lit but, beyond the wall on the opposite side of the street, a pool of darkness awaited. "That is what it's all about," I said, "Right from his beginnings, man has been at odds with the dark. His most primitive and underdeveloped ancestors knew for certain fact what modern man only feels as a crawling sensation, prickling at the back of his scalp. That hulking, uneducated brute knew there are dangerous things lurking out-with the firelight, hidden predators that lie in wait, just beyond the edges of that which we can clearly see.

"The fear is instinctual. A man leading a life in a city like this, in this most civilized of nations, knows that there isn't some wild tiger waiting to pounce at him out of some unlit alleyway, yet still he hastens his step and curls his shoulders in on himself for protection as he passes."

"For fear of losing his wallet to some ne'er-do-well," Marston whispered to his neighbour, loudly enough for all to hear.

"Maybe so," I countered, "but how many cut-purses would you expect to find loitering in a cemetery at midnight? None. For any thief worthy of the name knows better than to mount an ambush where none shall pass and yet, even with the knowledge that the graveyard path will be free of footpads, I daresay I will not be seeing any of you gentlemen taking that

route home this night."

Marston shrugged, a rueful smile playing round his lips. "Not unless my losses at the card table leave me without my cab fare home, I'd say."

I was warming to my subject and, before one of the group might ask the question I knew to be forming in their minds, I continued, "The telling of ghostly tales is man striking back at the dark. It is a gesture of defiance at a primeval fear which has gripped the species since before the language even existed to express it. For, as we all must be aware, language and vocabulary and the ability to express ideas are both wonderful tools and mighty weapons.

"By sharing such stories of what you may imagine might be haunting the unlit and unseen areas, you are staring out into the darkness and telling it that it holds no power and exerts no sway over you!"

As I spoke the words, I saw Ashbourne visibly blanch. "But," said he, gazing at the window pane, his eyes wide with wonder and fear, "what happens when you find that there's something in the darkness staring back in at you?"

The effect of this question on those around him was extraordinary. As one, they slowly allowed their gazes to drift toward the glass and the night outside. Just then, a carriage came speeding past on the cobbles below, the clatter shattering the silence like an unexpected thunderclap, startling several of my companions and causing Bayliss to lose both his glass, which shattered, and his temper, which broke just as violently. "Somebody close those damn curtains. There's nothing to be seen out there at this late hour, anyhow!"

I moved to do so, gripping the heavy fabric and drawing the curtains as near shut as I could get them, though a gap still remained between them, exposing a shaft of night. This produced an unfortunate effect on Ashbourne, who was at my shoulder so swiftly, it was almost as if he had taken flight. "Open them, please!" It was practically a sob and he seized the curtains from my grasp and made to fling them apart.

I could see his face reflected in the darkened glass at that very moment when he let out a ragged gasp and his expression darkened, as if finally admitting defeat and letting exhaustion take full possession of him. He looked almost to shrink half a foot when his entire body sagged into itself and he released the curtains to my grip with a muttered, "Open them. Please."

I did as he requested while he allowed himself to slump into a chair. After a moment, he poured himself a double measure of brandy, brought in by the attendant who, entirely unbidden but acting with those abnormally keen reflexes found in the better club employee, had also fetched dustpan and brush to clear away the remains of Bayliss's glass.

"My story," he began, "may come as something of a disappointment

after your creeping terrors and blood-soaked curses. It may not actually qualify as a story at all, since it has no conclusion… unless you accept a man being driven to insanity an ending. There is no sudden, ironic twist and no explanation for the events I shall endeavour to portray. Therefore, if it does not satisfy the criteria to qualify as a real story, I apologise. Though you may be assured that the terror I feel is very real. For now, I beg, please do not laugh when I state that I cannot abide partially open curtains during the hours of darkness." He need not have pleaded. There was no laughter to be heard nor smile to be seen.

"When I was a younger man," he said, pausing only to refill the brandy glass, which he had drained in one gulp, "though I am still, technically, young, despite feeling so worn down and tired… Well, before this premature decrepitude gripped me, I, too, was fond of seeking out these tales of the weird. Fond? I was fanatical! I scoured the bookstalls and libraries for anything I could find with a glimmer of the uncanny about it. My dear mother, a Christian and pious lady, was convinced that I was consigning myself to the pits of eternal damnation for inviting such 'devilry' into my life. Imagine, then, her relief when I made my vow to forego my beloved ghostly tales. Of course, she could not have been expected to realise that my reason for choosing to give up the literature of the macabre was that I had grown bored of it, with its avenging phantoms and midnight rides through haunted woods. These tales no longer held my fancy and I no longer wished to read ghost stories. No, gentlemen. I wished to live one!"

"You went actively seeking the supernatural?" I asked. "Surely, if you believed in such matters you were aware of the dangers of such a course?"

The young lawyer sighed as he regarded me, then replied, addressing himself to the entire group. "I did not give a moment's thought to dangers. The young seldom do. Ignorance in youth is like a shield, it seems. Only with the catalyst of experience gradually being added, the shield soon rusts away to nothing. All I cared for, at that time, was the thrill of seeking out a new experience, my thinking being that, if reading about phantoms produced such a pleasurable thrill of terror, how much more so would the feelings be intensified by actually encountering one?

"However, what you are no doubt waiting to hear, gentlemen, is just how I planned to make contact with the unknown. To that, I must answer with a query; how would you imagine I might make my attempts? With the spirit board and glass, of course, just as in the stories you have been exchanging all night.

"I was in university by now, and I had made friends who were as keen to experiment as I, and not merely with Tarot cards and the Ouija. One such friend managed to persuade me that our efforts to pierce the veil and

commune with those on other planes might be rewarded if we were in a more 'susceptible' frame of mind… and thus began my flirtation and subsequent love affair with powder and pill. My student days passed in a hazy rush and still my pursuit of the worlds beyond continued. Then came the day that my mother returned home and found me with the cards and the board, and I was in the street within minutes.

"Lodging with genuine friends, I was forced, slowly and painfully, to give up my twin addictions and, with some difficulty, I managed to claw my way through my course with an almost respectable qualification which led me to an almost impressive position with an almost successful firm of solicitors. In this new, respectable life, I would establish myself and prosper. Sadly, however, for the firm to which I had entrusted my future to prosper, they had a policy of accepting some clients and taking on some cases that other firms might not have welcomed so readily. One such case was the house at Greymarsh!"

Here Harlstane tapped his skull, attempting to dislodge a memory from its hiding place. "Greymarsh? That's in the North, isn't it? Over the border, even? I recall reading something about the town and a house on the outskirts. An old priory, if memory serves."

"Your memory does serve," Ashbourne replied. "If you knew the full reputation of that old priory and what is spoken of it in that frightened little town, you would find it hard to forget. The priory, long since empty, was being sold, with the purposes of turning it into a sanatorium. I accepted the task of providing a written report on the condition of the building following the previous owners' unexpected departure."

"Still hunting ghosts?" I queried.

"Quite the contrary. I knew all of the stories… well, many of the stories. I do not reckon that anyone living knows all of them. But I wanted to go to this dark, empty house and tell the darkness that I knew nothing lived there. I would use this as my opportunity to face the shadows and my own foolish past and put them both behind me. And, to achieve this, I would spend the night in the haunted house.

"I came equipped with candles and a small hamper and set up my temporary billet in one of the many bedrooms, filled with the debris of a suddenly fled inhabitant. And thus I waited and watched to prove to myself that nothing unnatural was to happen there.

"Unfortunately, I was wrong!

"My lonely vigil had begun to weigh down upon me and I had started slowly to drift off into sleep. I had drawn the heavy bed curtains tight around the four-poster, not wishing the light of my candle to be seen through a window by anyone passing and, in consequence, inadvertently add fuel to the local legends about the place. I have no idea how long that I, cocooned within those curtains, had been drifting in and out of sleep.

A few times, my eyes had fluttered open and registered that the candle had burned lower. On what may have been the fourth or fifth instance of this, I observed that the candle, now burnt almost entirely out, was guttering, as in a draught. I was also aware of a flow of chilly air that I had not encountered earlier. Still befuddled by sleep and not remotely making anything of it, I turned idly and saw that the curtains at the foot of the bed were open, just a few inches, showing a sliver of the darkness beyond.

"I was just reaching a fumbling hand to draw them closed again when I registered the awful face that was staring at me through the gap!"

Some startled exclamations greeted this alarming image that our young friend had conjured up and I'm more than certain that each man listening had, in his own imaginings, pictured a particular awful face straight from their own darkest imaginings.

Ashbourne took a sip before plunging onwards with his weird narrative. "In an instant, I had thrown myself bodily to the head of the bed, as far away from this unexpected observer as my cramped confines would allow. I was unsure whether it planned to continue merely staring at me, or if it was going to advance on me with dread purpose gleaming in those dark, dark eyes. And, at that moment, just as the tips of withered and waxen looking fingers began to creep round the curtain edges, the candle went out and I was alone in the dark with the owner of that curiously unformed face and those unfinished hands.

"Not waiting for this silent being to come scrambling across the mattress to me, I hurtled out of the bed and through the side curtains, nearly winding myself by stumbling over a bedside chest of drawers and landing in a heap in the corner. Looking up, fully expecting to see some pale thing bearing down on me out of the dark, I was relieved, then puzzled, then alarmed to note that I was alone in the bedroom and that the curtains at the foot of the bed were drawn once more.

"Striking a 'Lucifer' and hefting the heavy leg of a broken table, I dashed forward and prodded at the bed hangings, in case my nocturnal visitor had made itself comfortable within the bed and was awaiting my return. Eventually, I summoned up the courage to pull the draperies back. There was no one or nothing within."

Marston laughed, a little more shrilly than usual, I fancied. "Is that it? You think you saw something when you were half asleep in a house that is believed haunted and where your imagination was obviously overwrought?"

Ashbourne laughed, too, and his laughter was similarly shrill and close to hysteria. "If that was merely it, I should still be considering what an alarming experience it was, whilst also giving thanks that it was more than likely a nightmare, brought on, as you say, by my surroundings and their supposed history. However, since that time, I have seen that abom-

inable face again on more than one occasion. In truth, gentlemen, I fear I am being haunted by it.

"The event I have just described, that strange night in that strange bedchamber, took place practically one year ago. In the months that have followed, I have witnessed that oddly ancient yet curiously smooth and featureless face staring at me no less than several dozen times and the frequency of these sightings is on the increase. And while, frankly, you… some of you, at least, may question my sanity, I assure you that I am quite sane. Though I am unsure if I shall retain this status throughout this Hallowe'en night!

"Following that first, awful encounter in the bed chamber, the next sighting was while onboard the train back from that blighted spot to the city. After fleeing the priory, now convinced that its ranking as a haunted spot was well deserved, I had found myself at the village inn and, after rousing the landlord, who was none too welcoming, I procured a room and fell into a sound sleep which lasted most of the day. So it was that I rose when the sky was already darkening and was forced to take an overnight train back to London, if I wanted to avoid missing a day's work. I obtained a compartment, not wishing the company of strangers while my addled head tried to process the extraordinary events of the preceding night. I even found myself giggling, somewhat foolishly, at the thought of all my prior attempts with incantations and occult objects to call up an unearthly spirit, which had ended in failure, while an endeavour to disprove the existence of such things had summoned a monster.

"Naturally, within my briefcase, I had a pencil and paper and I began to make notes and memoranda concerning my visit to the town and that house. I must have been engaged in this for quite some time, since I recall glancing at my watch and seeing that we were already well into the new day. Standing to alleviate the cramp that had set in as I'd huddled over my legal pad, I fancied that a short stroll along the carriage's corridor would loosen me up a little. This was when I again caught sight of it; that pale face and those strange hands, holding the curtains open on the compartment window, just wide enough to look in on me.

"A few moments of darkness followed, which were as terrible as those I had endured in the bedroom. But, again, nothing assailed me and, when the train emerged from the tunnel, I was alone and unobserved, though I could hear the ticket collector chattering as he worked his way along the corridor. I would have asked him had he seen anyone loitering outside the compartment, until I spotted my reflection in the glass of the doors and realised that what I had been seeing was a reflection of the face, not staring in from the corridor but watching from outside of the train, following my escape through the night.

"After this I began to find myself almost expecting to see it and it was

frequently there. On visiting relatives, I would glimpse it waiting, immobile, beyond the parlour curtains, like some ruffian hidden beside the garden path, waiting to cut me down as I would leave for home. In the offices of my firm, there is a cellar which is accessible only by passing through a curtained alcove. I've seen it there and, as you may imagine, I find it impossible to enter that cellar, even though it contains the files on all our cases. The junior clerks have begun to whisper about me and my superiors, I know, are watching over me. Hah! As if there wasn't already something watching over me.

"I can no longer dine at my favourite restaurant, as the dining there takes place in curtained booths. You see, even after all this time and even though I expect to see it, I am still terrified by its every appearance. And, just last week, I ran screaming from the gentlemen's outfitters three streets away from my office, because they expected me to enter a changing room behind a curtain, where I could clearly see my silent follower waiting in the gloom within.

"At least, it *was* silent. Until today, that is…

"Having finished my working day just as the sky was darkening, I was hastening to my home through the usual five o'clock crowds. I have made quite a habit of keeping my head down when I am out and about, lest I should inadvertently look upon my follower looking upon me from some new position. I realise ignorance of danger is no defence, but I do not think my mind or my heart could take the strain of discovering from just how many outlooks it can watch my progress toward my early grave. Therefore, I have become quite adept at moving through a flow of people while my eyes are fixed on the pavement directly ahead of me. So, accidents, like this evening's misadventure, were commonly avoided. But there, without warning and thrust directly into my path was the baby carriage.

"I was far from graceful as I ducked back to avoid the wheels of the perambulator and, even as I raised a hand to steady my fall, I felt the chill touch of some fabric, brushing against my extended wrist. Looking up, sharply, I was horror-stricken to find that I was teetering back towards a set of dingy curtains that hung in the open doorway of a disreputable looking haberdashery.

"In a panic, I pitched myself forward, grasping wildly for some form of support that I might use to pull myself back from the gloom that lay beyond those curtains. My hand happened upon the handle of the perambulator, causing it to tilt violently and spill out an assortment of rattles and ribbons and other childish paraphernalia.

"I realised that I must have appeared like some wild madman, as I struggled to keep the child's carriage upright. The infant inside, as one might expect, did not take kindly to being jostled so vigorously and

protested in a keening, high pitched shriek.

"I scrambled about for one of the scattered toys to pacify the child, oblivious to the actions of the mother, who was rocking the carriage on its springs and murmuring soothing tidings from behind her veil. I proffered the silver rattle, toward the infant. Then my hand was stilled as I looked upon that veiled lady. She was raising her hands, lifting the folds of the lace, parting it.

"Averting my eyes from the horror I knew must be revealed before me, I turned toward the child… The child who was concealed behind yet more veils and shawls, draped over the hood of the carriage to keep the cold October air away from what lay within, craning to face me through the gap in the curtaining, a pale hand stretching out between the gap, too long to be a child's arm. Too long and withered and waxen. And then, it spoke my name. Not in the voice of an infant. In a whispering gurgle, as though the darkness it nestled in was thick and liquid…"

"Ashbourne," I said, "Enough, now."

A few of the others murmured their agreement, though I would venture to say that their eyes betrayed a morbid fascination with the young man's progressively more frantic account.

"It doesn't just hide in the dark," he mumbled. "It can hide in the darkness inside people. I ran. I found myself here, where I knew there would be others, where I would not be alone with the darkness."

An attendant had come through, silently waiting with our outer coats. Bayliss took this as his cue, rubbing his hands as if cold, unmindful of the still blazing fire. "Time we good gentlemen were heading homewards." He cast a sympathetic glance at our broken and defeated member, whom I was helping into a threadbare overcoat.

"I'm relieved, at last, to have told you my tale," Ashbourne said, a game attempt at good cheer in his voice. "You cannot imagine the strain it has been, knowing that you are alone with such monstrous knowledge."

"You are not alone," I told him, leading him slowly down the great marble steps and through the Reception Hall. A discreet nod to our other companions assured them that our distraught companion would be delivered safely into his home. As the remainder of the group drifted apart, they formed into coteries of two or more, making arrangements to share transport, with gruff statements that it would be "a damnable waste of money to take separate cabs going in the same directions," each of them unwilling to voice the dread of carrying Ashbourne's tale alone with them through the darkened streets.

"Never alone," smiled Ashbourne, grimly, as I flagged down a carriage. He merely glanced once at the curtained windows on the side doors and then lowered his gaze again, until I waved it on.

"I once saw the face in a carriage window," he confided, as we walked in the direction of his lodgings. "I was within, looking out. It was without, glaring in." He fell silent and it was I who spoke throughout the rest of our walk.

"Science is obliterating the last dregs of superstition. Where once there was the belief in magic, there is now the confidence in technology and the rational is replacing the irrational. The creatures of myth and folklore, the demons and the spectres, have little influence in modern man's world! Soon, there will be nothing left to fear."

We had entered the building where the young lawyer held lodgings, his small set of rooms on an upper floor in a tall building. Even from the street, I could observe that the curtains were already drawn, permanently closed against the external darkness. Ashbourne unlocked the door to his rooms and, before entering, flicked a switch that was mounted just within the doorway. Electric light flooded the narrow hallway, so intensely bright that I had, for a moment, to shield my eyes against the glare, before joining him, uninvited but unbarred, inside his home. He had moved through to a compact sitting room, again filling it with the glow from a ceiling bulb.

"Here again is an example of what I was striving to describe," I intoned, indicating the glowing bubble of glass. "A dread atmosphere does not come with glowing filaments, rather in the fluttering shadows cast by candlelight. And, just as science and philosophy and alienists, with their studies of the human mind, are blotting out the ancient beliefs, so a thing like this, man's ability to harness a natural force such as electricity, is gradually keeping the darkness at bay. Before many years have passed, this power will illuminate the whole globe or, at the very least, those parts of it inhabited by humanity.

"And, if the darkness can be held back, then what of those things that dwell in dark places? There would seem to be no place for them in this newer, brighter world."

"I thought there was no place for them in the current world," said he, looking right at me. "I thought that, even as I entered one of those dark places and brought a passenger out with me."

I smiled at this term. "Some creatures will cling on most tenaciously to ensure their survival. And now, you have unburdened yourself. Your story is told and your dread is shared and it has multiplied."

"Is that what you think I have achieved?" he asked, a hint of a challenge in his tone.

"I know so," I told him, walking past him to the bay windows that took up half of one wall. "That is, after all, what I planned."

He nodded, to himself more than to me. "Then it is true, what I glimpsed over your shoulder, reflected in the Smoking Room window as

you made to draw the curtains. It was only for an instant, showing up against all that darkness on the other side of the glass. Your real face was breaking through…"

I had no need for the disguise anymore. The body that had served as my host, a man with an enormous capacity for darkness within him, who had remained resolutely unaware of my frequent residencies within his form would be discarded soon. Such men are easy to find. "There were some places where even I could not watch over you," I admitted. "And I needed to be there to ensure that the circumstances were right for you to share your torment. This form, this fleshy clothing, has merely been a transport for what I really am." I used the hands of my flesh host to pull back the curtains and, in the gap that opened up before me, my own, more fearful face was reflected back. Then, drawing them wider apart, until the window was nothing more than an obsidian void, I beckoned the lawyer to me.

"You have kept me, for a long time, peering in from the darkness, waiting just beyond the veil that separates our different worlds. I have waited for you to seize the chance and throw back the veil… to face me and all that you fear. Now you must witness things from my perspective. Now, you are ready to find out what else we have waiting in the darkness."

He seemed to step toward the curtains almost willingly, until I allowed the mask to slip fully from my face and my true features were revealed to him under the stark electric lighting. Seeing the face that had so haunted his mind for all this time had a strong adverse effect on him and he began to struggle. So I snapped his ribs and pierced his heart with my fingertips and dragged him through the curtains into the darkness beyond.

He would be found shortly afterwards, he and the remains of my host, impaled on the railings below, his chest torn wide. Some terrible accident would be supposed. A struggle would be suspected and rumours would spread that the young man had been slowly losing his mind and had attacked his friend in a delusional frenzy.

But others, certain men, powerful and prominent men in the city would know that really, something so awful that it defied description had visited that spot on that Hallowe'en night and had perhaps walked amongst them. And they, too, these most rational men, would draw their curtains tightly against the night time and instil in their children the knowledge that something does exist beyond their own little pools of light.

And this knowledge is one that shall thrive, despite mankind's attempted advances out of the dark. Which is as it should be. For, we who dwell in dark places do not wish to be forgotten. We like you to know we

are here, always, and to look to us occasionally…
Otherwise, we will be compelled to look in on you…

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THE CALLING OF THE SEA

by Billy Turner

THE sea called to her. Called her towards the blackness. And Sarah stood, unclothed and perfectly still, staring out into the dark beyond. The waves ran up and licked at her ankles before retreating silently. How was she to resist the ocean's cries for her?

Slowly, purposefully, Sarah began to walk. More waves rushed to greet her. More daring this time, kissing high up her legs, touching with icy strokes. Her breathing quickened - in up to her waist now, her arms skating across the rippling surface as she struggled to keep her balance against the force of the tide - in turn, encouraging her back towards the safety of the shore before pulling back and leading her gently into the black nothingness.

Sarah, overcome by a joyous serenity, closed her eyes and went gladly with the sea. Totally at one with her surroundings, which were now caressing the contours of her heavy breasts. The sound of waves breaking on the shoreline now just a distant hiss, replaced by the gentle lapping of water against skin.

She turned to take one last look at the far-off lights dotted along the shoreline before relaxing gently onto her back.

The ink-black sky looked more beautiful than it had ever done before. Cloudless, it revealed millions of brilliant stars watching over the earth and Sarah whispered, 'Take me Lord. Take me.'

An elderly lady, taking her regular morning stroll along the shore, discovered the grotesquely bloated body washed up amongst the rocks.

Nine days had past since Sarah decided to end her life, and her once beautiful form was now ugly, ballooned and blotched blue and green.

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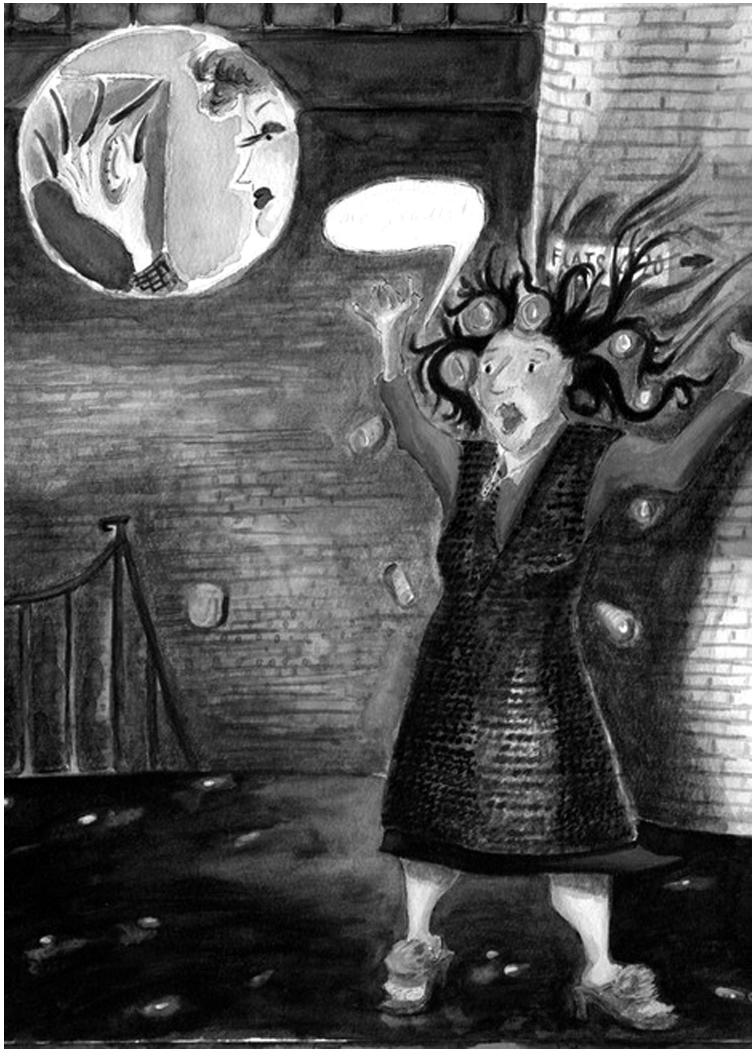

QUIET DESPERATION

By James Brough

SHE wasn't going to do it. She knew she'd never do it. But still, as she lay in bed, kept awake by her bruises, it was something to think about. It was something to pass the hours for another night, lying still, not daring to move lest she wake him. He grunted and rolled over. She cringed, thinking that he might wake, and then relaxed as he started to snore. Another reason to give up any hope of sleep for tonight. Another reason to – she wasn't going do it. Still, it was something to think about.

These days, the dog was the one thing they both loved. He was a Labrador retriever. A great fat lump of a dog. Always so cheerful. Whenever she went into the kitchen, first thing in the morning, he was up and out of his basket, bouncing up to her, tail wagging, tongue out, grinning all over his face. She'd told him about it once, when she brought his breakfast up. He'd told her not to be stupid. If the dog was pleased to see her, it was just because it knew it was going to be fed. He always called the dog it these days. Never Albert. He'd chosen the name Albert, of course. She didn't know why he'd chosen it, but she'd gone along with it.

He'd talked once about training the dog, but had only ever got him to do one thing. Albert would sometimes wander upstairs. He'd found him once, sniffing around outside the bedroom, whining to be let in. She'd expected him to be angry, but he hadn't. Instead he'd gone to take the dog downstairs. He'd gone down, but the dog had hovered at the top of the stairs. They were steep stairs and the dog was obviously scared. He'd called. "Come on then Albert! Come on boy!" and after a hesitation, the dog had started gingerly down. She could remember how he'd got faster and faster as he went until his paws were scrabbling at the steps, trying desperately to keep up with his own momentum, half a step away from going arse-over-tit to the bottom and cracking his skull on the front door.

The idea had come to her a few weeks ago. She'd been heading upstairs. Just as she got to the bend in the stairs, she'd heard the shout of "Come on then Albert!" followed by the scrabblescrabblescrabble of claws. She'd rounded the bend and seen the dog barrelling full tilt towards her. They'd collided and her feet had been knocked from under her. It was only her grab at the handrail that had saved her from going right the way to the bottom of the stairs. If she'd had her hands full, she might be dead by now. He'd just laughed and said that if she was so cack-handed that she couldn't manage a set of stairs without almost breaking her neck, then that was her look out.

But that was the point she kept coming back to. If she'd had her hands

full. Every morning she had to have his breakfast ready by the time the post came at 7:30. When he heard it fall through the letterbox, he'd come downstairs to collect it. He'd only started doing this a few weeks ago. Before, he'd been happy for her to bring his post up on the tray with his breakfast. Then one morning, he'd noticed that one of the envelopes was ripped. She'd told him it had happened when the envelope got caught in the letterbox, but he hadn't believed her. That had been a bad morning. She'd made the mistake of asking what was so secret that he was scared she might read it. Some of the bruises were still fading.

So now, every morning, he came down to collect the post, put it on his breakfast tray and carried it all back upstairs to bed. She was quite happy with this. It gave her the chance of a few minutes peace before she had to go out. And it gave her an idea. Every morning, he would go up the steep stairs, hands full, carrying his tray. She thought of him rounding the corner, colliding with the careering dog. She thought of him knocked clear off his feet, caroming down the stairs in a tangle of arms and legs, breakfast things flying. She thought of the crack his skull would make as it hit the front door.

She looked across at the clock. 6:50am. Time to move. She had things to get ready. Carefully, she eased out from under the duvet and padded out of the room. Downstairs, Albert looked up at her from his basket. His tail wagged. She bent down stiffly and stroked him. "Come on then Albert. Come on boy."

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HOTEL NAIADE

By Wendell McKay

A FEW heads turned as I opened the door, giving me the impression that the café had very few customers. A couple of old guys sat at a table near the window, and a younger man sat in the corner reading a magazine, providing badly-needed reading light with his cigarette. A few stools adorned the bar, protected in turn by a weary-looking young woman in a tank top with a tangled knot of raven-black hair, furiously scrubbing the countertop.

"*Buonasera*," I warbled.

"*Buonasera*." She bowed her head, but not before I caught a glimpse of very striking and instantly suspicious brown eyes. Had my accent proven fake already? "*Cosa prendi, signore*?" She must have thought I was a complete dork, wherever I was from.

"*Vorrei un espresso, per favore*." I hated espresso worse than Satan, but she wasn't finding that out so easily.

"*Un espresso*," she repeated, flouncing to the espresso machine. "*Milanese*?"

"*Mi scusi*?"

"Are you from Milan?"

"No, I'm... fuck." I could have bluffed it out, pretended to be British or Irish, but I didn't think it would work. I definitely could have pretended to be Canadian. I could have sat at the bar for hours and bitched about those damn Red Wings running away with the Stanley Cup. I guess it was the last remaining vestige of show patriotism I had left that persuaded me to stand proud and declare myself a member of the same great nation that had given the world Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, and Charles Nelson Reilly. Besides, she might have asked to look at my passport, and at that stage I really couldn't have fooled her. What would my story be? "I *like* paying more for prescription drugs?" Damn, she was good.

"I'm American," I sighed, condemned.

"Who did you vote for?"

"That really isn't important. How much for the espresso?"

"Two euros."

"Your English is pretty good."

"Maybe I want to visit England."

I sipped the espresso. "Oh, God… I really shouldn't have ordered this."

She started laughing uproariously.

"What?" I noticed the two old guys trying to restrain laughs of their own.

"The look on your face from the espresso. Thanks. I really needed to laugh." Her shoulders stopped shaking and her face grew very somber as if she'd just remembered something she badly wanted to forget.

"Are you okay?" I thought I saw the two old guys suddenly turn away. The younger sat motionless.

"It's nothing. I'll be all right."

"Antonia." She extended her hand.

"Franklin." Unsure whether to shake it or kiss it, I did both.

The next hour pissed away in small talk. As we talked, about heaven knew how many different bizarre topics, I could tell that she was questioning me somehow, testing me. I wasn't quite sure how, and I recognized that if I called her on it, I'd fail the test. I wanted to pass.

At the end, the two old guys stood and left, waving to Antonia as they did so. The younger guy put down the semiotics daily or whatever the hell he'd been reading and walked slowly past us, shaking his head. I suppose clucking his tongue would have been too gauche or its Italian equivalent.

"He…doesn't like Americans?"

"It's not that—he's in love with me, poor Andrea. Don't laugh." She presented herself in the dim light, the rich curves of her body plainly visible beneath the tank top and stained khakis. The knot of hair finally came loose and fell around her face. "Damn." I found her nothing less than unforgivably desirable.

"Why would I laugh?" I leaned forward over the counter with my chin cradled in my hands. "*Ah, che bella figura*."

She laughed and turned away slightly, rearranging her hair. "Is that the first thing you learned to say in Italian?"

"Pretty close. Hey, Andrea won't be waiting outside for me with a knife, will he?"

She laughed again, this time with her face in her hands. After a bit, she stopped and stood there. I could tell that something was bothering her.

"Look, tell me what's wrong. I'm American; that's almost as good as being a therapist. It'll feel better if you tell someone, really."

"How is being American like being a psychiatrist?"

"Our culture's so obsessed with that 'getting in touch with your feelings' shit, and then with guys, they turn right around and tell them it's wrong, that men don't cry and all that stuff. We all get so fucked up that we might as well all be psychiatrists." The rant sounded better in Midwest brewpubs, and I definitely spoiled its effect by not drinking heavily and spitting when I said it.

She didn't seem to notice.

"I'll tell you, But…" She came around the bar, scurrying furtively as if unseen eyes were watching. "Franklin, I have to trust you. It is very

complicated and…" She scrunched up her face. "It's weird. It's really fucking *apeshit*. Did I say that right?"

"Beautifully." It was the sexiest thing I'd ever heard. "How can you trust me better?"

"I must get to know you better. It seems silly, but…"

I opened my mouth and then closed it. She probably knew best.

"May I ask you some questions?"

I nodded, hunching down at my stool.

"What was your mother's last name…before she married?"

"Connor."

"Have you ever done anything of which you were very ashamed? Something terrible?"

I'd been an asshole, but so had Ellen, and all was fair in… *oh*.

"I was a kid, maybe eight or nine. There was this other kid named Martin who lived in our neighborhood and… I don't know. We picked on him for whatever bullshit reason we'd come up with. I wasn't actually the bully in this situation, either. I was one of the jeering mob, which I think was really worse. There was this brick wall in our yard, and we'd gotten Martin up against it, and we were just…throwing eggs at him. He was scared. I mean, he was terrified, he was crying, he was screaming, he was *begging* us to stop it. It was awful. Every time I think of that I fucking hate myself."

"Oh, wow." She looked genuinely appalled. "That's horrible."

"I told you it was shameful."

"I think I can trust you."

"What's wrong, Antonia? You've dragged it out to where I can't stand it anymore."

"My mother. She isn't sick."

"She's not. But you're still worried about her?"

"Yes. You want to know why?"

I nodded.

"My mother. When I was very little, she was… far away."

"Distant."

"Yes—distant. She never talked with me and my father died when I was a baby."

"Shitty childhood."

She managed to smile through tears. "Yes. My mother and my stepfather were very…strange. They…experimented."

"*Experimented*?" Something in the way she said it made my hackles rise. A chill seemed to affect me, and I felt compelled to look around and make sure there was no one else in the coffeehouse. I wondered if she'd have to close yet. "You mean experimented with drugs?"

"No. Not drugs. Magic."

"*Magic*."

"I said it would sound strange."

"It…certainly does."

"You know the Sixties? A very strange time, yes?"

"Yeah." I didn't actually know, but my friend's Uncle Larry had told me.

"My mother…she was a student then, very wild…unorthodox," she finally announced, screwing up her face, I thought, in an attempt to find the word. "She had been brought up in an aristocratic family and she wanted to…piss off her family? She learned to cast spells and began to meet… groups of *witches*."

"Covens," I supplied.

"Yes, covens. Eventually she grew tired of the coven and left her husband—my father. She stopped working magic and became a teacher. Her life, my childhood, they were normal."

"But something happened?"

"She married again—my stepfather. I never liked him. She was always depressed."

"Was she clinically depressed? Is that why she's sick?"

"I don't know. She's disappeared. A week ago I went by to visit her and she was gone. The neighbors knew nothing. I phoned my stepfather. He knew nothing. She'd *vanished*."

"Have you called the police or anything?"

"I'm afraid. There are things…I suspect…with which the police cannot help."

"You could be a little more forthcoming, you know." The look in her eyes made me wish I'd died on the spot. She was pouring her heart out to a complete stranger, and I was acting like I had someplace to go (which I didn't). "I'm sorry, that was the espresso talking. Please go on." She looked reluctant, and I couldn't blame her. "Please. I'm really sorry, Antonia."

"We were eating dinner a few months ago." I got the feeling that my pleading had been irrelevant. She would pursue this tale to the bitter end, whatever my reaction.

"I had not seen my mother for some time and we had much to discuss. Just as we finished, there was a knock at the door. My mother didn't seem to think it mattered at first. She rose and answered the door. I'll never forget how she shuddered and staggered back when she discovered who our visitors were. They were two women, one young, one old. The older one was dressed in very old clothes, which was strange. It was as if she had decided to wear the clothes she wore when she was young—stuff like you see in old De Sica movies, like *The Bicycle Thief* or something."

"*Open City*," I suggested, trying to be helpful (/impress her).

She shook her head impatiently. "Rossellini. Not quite the same thing, but pretty close. The younger one was dressed like some model from the Sixties, with one of those berets from *Bonnie and Clyde* and bell bottoms. They both had the blondest hair, almost as if they were Germans or something, maybe from the Tyrol. I could tell that they knew my mother well, even if they hadn't seen each other in a long time. My mother asked them to come in with a voice that still frightens me. They sat in our living room and my mother grabbed my wrist as if I would suddenly fly away."

"What did they do? Did anything happen?"

"No, they just sat and talked. My mother had told me of the coven before, so I guessed these had to be more of their number. It was strange…they spoke of many things, but nothing very specific… until they began asking about me. They asked if I was going to university, what I was studying. I could feel my mother's hand grip my wrist tighter with every question. Eventually they left. We never saw them again, but my mother was never really happy again after that, and she became very irritable, almost paranoid. Then she vanished. My stepfather's no help - he's started drinking again."

"You think her disappearance had something to do with the other two witches?"

Antonia nodded. "She wasn't the same after they came. If she'd gone somewhere to get help, she would have let me know." She produced a small piece of paper. "This arrived at my flat a few days ago."

"I'm not that good at reading Italian."

"It says to come to this address tonight in an hour if I wish to see my mother." She pointed to an odd seal which I hadn't seen before in the lower left-hand corner, inked in ball-point pen. There was no easily recognizable figure or device in the seal, but the dazzlingly intricate patterns and whorls made some sort of coherent whole. "This is the seal of the coven," she told me.

I leaned back from my stool, trying to take in the whole thing.

"Will you come to this hotel with me?"

I'm not sure I really believed what she was telling me. I think that's why I went with her.

The "hotel" wasn't what I expected because it *looked* like a hotel. In America. When I thought of Italian hotels, I thought of decrepit Victorian (Risorgimento?) *pensiones*, not glossy-and-then-faded-before-their-time Ramadas or Holiday Inns. And yet, that's what it looked like. I found my sense of aesthetic fitness satisfied in one detail, though—the ground around the hotel was bare and made a comforting barrier between the "Old City" and the Gino Agnelli-inspired "future world" of the sixties.

So that was cool.

"Do you have places like this in America?"

"Um…sort of, I guess. What exactly is this place?"

"It used to be a hotel. Now it's a combination of small business offices and residential flats. Very few people come out this way."

The bare branches of trees draped our approach to the hotel, dark against the sickly blue-violet of the night sky. The building, coldly white and antiseptic, gleamed dully in the light from distant roadways. Turning to Antonia, I noticed her steps begin to slow, as if there was a barrier around the building made of invisible molasses.

I laughed. "Yeah, molasses of *fear*," I said out loud.

"What?"

"Nothing. It was stupid."

"If she's not here," Antonia ventured, almost sounding hopeful, "at least we tried. If she is…" Antonia turned toward me with a small smile. "If she is, then the best thing you can do to help me is simply be there. I get nervous when it comes to confronting my mother."

"Okay. You think she's there of her own free will?"

"I don't know. It just makes me nervous. You seemed heaven-sent, you know," she said, ducking her head a bit in embarrassment. "I figured with an American, they might be the nervous ones. They might think you have a gun or something."

"Uh, yeah. Sorry about that, by the way. The cops wouldn't let me take my mandatory Glock on the plane with me."

"I was kidding." She smiled. "They'll seem… less sure of themselves, I think, if someone unknown to them is with me."

We had reached the hotel doors, which looked like the aggressively utilitarian entrance to an office of some "Great Society" government program gone hideously wrong. We could see a reception counter and a hallway leading inward to some unseen destination, all clinically suffused with an icy light-blue sheen that gave me the willies.

Neither of us seemed very keen to go inside.

"I wish I was braver," she whispered.

"I wish I was, too." Until now, I really hadn't admitted to myself how genuinely bizarre the whole thing was—not good bizarre, but the bizarre that included Satanic clowns. Even with Antonia, I felt very small and very alone, the old hotel leaning over me with all its windows twisted in a demonic leer.

A beefy, unshaven man in a half-unbuttoned silk shirt staggered in front of me.

My scream was pretty comical.

Antonia made an exclamation and the two started chattering animatedly in Italian, most of which I couldn't follow. The one thing I managed

to take away was that he was her stepfather and that he had been worried about her mother. He was an interesting-looking character, to say the least—I got the impression of a once prosperous guy who'd gone to seed. The scent of alcohol rode his breath hard; it certainly wasn't beer, so I couldn't tell what he'd been drinking.

I stood there rather sheepishly as they went on at each other. Eventually, Antonia signaled him to give us some privacy.

"He says he has just come from my mother. He says she will not listen to reason, that she… she is under their spell…"

"I understand if you don't want to—"

"I'll go with you." I had wanted an interesting experience in Europe, and one just fell into my lap right here. I had no other option.

She turned to her stepfather and said something in Italian that made him back away, a betrayed look on his features. I was surprised to find myself stung by his pain; it reminded me of a look I'd seen one time on my dad's face.

The betrayal apparently didn't last long, for he started laughing. They were long, gasping, retching laughs, the laughs of a man who didn't care if he died from them, for the joke was so damned, deadly funny. He doubled over as if he would vomit.

I stood transfixed by the spectacle for a few seconds, to feel something warm slide around my waist. It was Antonia's bare arm, her hand squeezing my side in reassurance. I looked down at her beautiful brown eyes and her warm, inspiring smile, and I wanted to take her in my arms and kiss her like the fucking asteroid was on its way.

Her stepfather waved mockingly at us; I could sense by the guttural desperation in his voice that he was swearing at us. Antonia kissed me gently on the cheek. I felt freshly buoyed by a pleasant glow filling my entire being. I hadn't been kissed in a long time. "Come," she said, and we both entered the hotel of the witches.

Of all the profound things I didn't say, my personal favorite was "some hotel." An ex-girlfriend and I had once decided to stay in "The Imperial Arms," a hideous fifties monstrosity back home in Delphi. This place was worse because it looked so consciously modern, a doomed attempt to announce the arrival of a brave new Europe, miraculously arisen from the scars and ruin left by Allied bombers and German tanks.

"What's the name of this place?" My voice echoed, scaring the shit out of me. I tried to look like it just pissed me off.

"The Naiade." She turned toward me, nervous and hesitant, as well she might be. "Are you sure you want to go further?"

"Please." My "reassuring smile" must have looked *so* fucking stupid.

The lobby was cool and sterile and a bit of it still managed to gleam

through two or three decades of obvious neglect. The lights were on but the clerk behind the counter was absent.

"No concierge?"

"Not after eleven. People here…they don't like visitors."

"I wonder why…" We walked slowly through the foyer, our steps resounding through the empty hall. I told myself I'd have an entertaining story to tell all the grandnieces and nephews, bless their little hearts. *Kids*, I pictured myself telling them after a long day teaching them to play Atari 2600 like I did when I was a kid ("nice *abacus*, you old shit," one of them would tell me, knowing his parents wouldn't believe he'd say a thing like that), *kids, she was the most beautiful girl I'd ever laid eyes on, and we were alone and imperiled in an Italian hotel full of evil witches*. *Kids*, I pictured myself saying with a grotesque satyr's leer totally inappropriate for their age, *chicks really get horny when they get scared*. Golden years, you see.

"This is the elevator." We stopped before two shiny doors, the floors above marked with incongruous Art Deco numbering.

"I would have recognised it."

She smirked and squeezed my arm in rebuke.

I heard a noise and froze. "What was that?" I hissed. It was a scuttling, like that of a rat or mouse.

"What was what?" she asked. The scuttling came again, louder this time, more insistent. It was all over the place. It filled my head, pounding and pounding. Wait. Scuttling doesn't pound.

"What was in that espresso?" I don't think I meant it as a joke, but she decided to take it so.

"Don't joke like that. You're making me nervous."

"S-Sorry."

She pressed the "up" button for the elevator. "We'll be fine," she said.

The elevator, too close for comfort, pulsed like its exterior was dancing to some weird beat. Ancient and musty, the interior walls were covered with some sort of Turkish carpet decoration, strips of exotica leading to a ceiling boasting two long, narrow, old-fashioned rows of electric lights. As Antonia pressed the buttons to begin taking us up, I let my gaze wander around the elevator, taking in the walls and the floor and Antonia, until it returned to the ceiling.

In each corner of the ceiling lurked a tiny gargoyle's head.

I started at seeing the first one. "What are those?" I peered closer. They were made of wood, with some sort of gold-colored varnish.

"Gargoyles."

"They don't fit too well with the general ambience, do they?" The elevator was growing infernally hot—I stripped to my T-shirt.

"They were originally meant to guard against evil spirits. The design-

er of the hotel had strange tastes." Her voice seemed lonely and hollow, a voice whose hope was ebbing fast.

"Hey. Antonia…" I put my arm around her and squeezed awkwardly, very unsure of myself. "It'll be all right—I'm sure she's fine."

Instead of smacking me and shoving me against the wall, she huddled close and put her arm around my waist.

"Franklin, thank you for doing this with me."

"Come on. It's my good deed for the day." I winced inside as soon as the words left my mouth. Of all the *American* things to say… still, I meant it sincerely.

Very carefully, I leant into her hair, conscious all the while of the creaking and incredibly slow ascent of the prehistoric elevator, and softly inhaled the spicy, musky richness that seemed to throb from every strand. I tried not to make too much noise and raised my left hand over her head, poised to…

I wasn't sure what I would do. I wanted to touch it so fucking bad, run my aching hand through the velvety dark chocolate wonder that lay below. Its smell overwhelmed me, intoxicating and magical and bearing me inexorably down.

She turned her head toward me at that same moment, her sloe eyes aglow and her full lips pursed slightly in an indulgent smile. The smile twisted in bemusement at my hand, hovering above her like a carnal, five-fingered halo.

"Are you…protecting me?"

I couldn't say anything. I just looked at her, painfully aware that there was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. Of course, I wanted to do neither.

"No," I answered. I stroked her long, tangled hair, reveling in the softness and letting my fingers catch between the strands. "I don't think you need any help from me."

"But you're here anyway."

I kissed her - long, smooth, sweet, and fragrant, like I'd truly tasted wine for the first time. I brought my other arm around her and drew her in, gently taking her by her ample waist, firm beneath her clothes. She pulled closer.

"I know that was a little forward, but—"

She silenced me, putting a finger to my lips. I would have preferred her to stop me with *her* lips, but fair enough, I suppose.

The elevator rattled forbiddingly.

"Oh, this is one space-age elevator, Antonia."

"It was a miracle of sixties architecture: a high-tech exterior masking Victorian secrets."

"Victorian? It's really that old?"

"It is *very* old." She folded her arms suddenly, as if she was cold.

"We're getting closer."

"Maybe we should have brought weapons."

"Weapons?" She smiled and turned to me, disbelief mixed with affection. "What weapons would we use?"

"I don't know. Two-by-fours or something. Rocks."

She sighed, a deep, mournful, muted dirge suffusing her lungs. "We will simply have to do our best, you and I."

The way she spoke signalled some kind of danger I hadn't been expecting. I should have been scared, and I was a little, but I also didn't want to leave Antonia. Essentially, as with all good things, I did it to impress a girl.

I took her hand to my lips and we rode up the floors in blissful, terrified silence.

The elevator finally stopped, making my heart skip a space.

"We're here," observed Antonia.

"Yes," I uselessly replied.

The door opened.

The air shuddered with an evil kind of warmth, beckoning and inviting us into a malevolent, shivering hallway. I felt slightly disoriented for a few moments, as if someone had slapped me lightly but firmly. I blinked a couple of times, and the hallway, which had been shifting and shimmering, resolved itself into a solid picture. The soft reds and browns and golds congealed into patterns, both on the walls and on the floors. At the end I could see a colossal windowpane set in what promised to be an enormously ornate facing of grilled ironwork.

A very curious hotel indeed. I turned to Antonia, not sure what to ask.

She stood there, lips slightly parted and lungs heaving beneath her chest, as if she was accustoming her system to a thinner level of oxygen. Her eyes looked curiously vacant, and I wondered again if she was quite all right.

"Antonia?"

She turned toward me, a sheepish look on her face. "People here leave their gas on oftener than they should."

"That's why it looks so weird?"

"Yes. Franklin, you can just leave me here, you know. I can manage on my own, I think, and you've been wonderful to come this far." Her mouth set in a grim line. "I can take care of myself."

"I know. I'm not going anywhere."

Her tense, subdued face broke out into a gorgeous smile.

"Thank you." She kissed me on the cheek and I smelled the musky tang of violets and patchouli. I took her hand. "I'm not *scared*," she unconvincingly protested.

"Maybe not. I am." We started walking down the hallway.

The strange patterns on the walls turned out to be flowers, which grew more intricate and grotesque the closer one inspected them. I got the weirdest impression that the engrossing smells pervading the hallway came from the painted blooms themselves—I wasn't sure how much I bought into Antonia's story about tenants leaving the gas on.

"Which one is number - "

"It is some distance." Her voice sounded very small and lonely. "The people we must see have been living here for some time."

"They weren't, like…terrorists or anything, were they? You know, like the Red Brigade?"

"No." If I didn't know any better I'd say she was mocking. "For their purposes, they have remained in hiding, but they are no terrorists. Terrorists kill. These…witches," she hissed, "they do not kill. They preserve life only to ruin it, to turn people into slaves. They're worse than *anything*." She stopped in the middle of the hallway, shaking uncontrollably, her fists clenched. She muttered something in Italian and I could tell she was close to crying.

"Antonia." I moved in front of her, unsure whether to take her in my arms. There was no question that I was increasingly nervous and frightened of what we might face. I could have left her—on what grounds I wasn't sure. I could live a prosperous life back home, live to eighty or ninety, but I knew that I'd go to bed every night destined for a nightmare starring her courageous, terrified features for a fevered, guilty mind.

She pressed her head against my chest, trembling and anxious, but I could feel the rigid, determined set of her body along mine. I caressed her for a few moments and then held her in front of me, my always greedy hands encircling her middle.

"Franklin, this is insane." Her giggle mixed sweetly with her sniffles.

"I know. It's probably my fault—that's how my life usually plays out."

"You have to go back."

"Nah. Come on. Let's go see your mom." I sounded a lot braver than I felt.

"Come here," she whispered. I leant forward and she kissed me like some ferocious animal, grabbing my head and mashing our mouths together. Did she expect it to be the last time?

"I just want you to know," she rasped in a moaning voice, both fear and desire, "I just want you to know you've become very dear to me."

"You also, Antonia." My fear started to slacken as I gazed into her honeyed eyes. I looked ahead, the window at the far end seemingly no closer. "Should we go on?"

"Yes." She smiled in a way I'd remember for the rest of my life. "My

mother's waiting."

The door to 715 was…a door. It was rectangular, as they often were, painted an off-red with the number above a small brass knocker in the center. That was it. Just a door, after the waking fiendishness we'd passed through to get there. Somehow, that unnerved me even more. I heard nothing behind it.

"Another door," observed Antonia with a slight smile.

"So do we just *knock* or - "

Something scuttled along the floor behind me, heading off in the direction of the window. It was the same scuttling I'd heard on the first floor. I whirled around to confront whatever it was, sheer curiosity vanquishing a sudden, crippling fear, but there was nothing. I stared down the hall in both directions as best I could, but all in vain.

"What the fuck…" I loped down towards the window for a few steps. "Where…" I turned back to Antonia. "Antonia, did you see - "

She was gone.

There was no way she could have gotten all the way back to the elevator that quickly. I hadn't heard the door open, I hadn't seen it open…

She had vanished. Pure and simple.

I was alone and lost in an incredibly weird hotel in the middle of a foreign country. Antonia had vanished into thin air and there was some weird thing scuttling its creepy little heart out through the musty, decrepit corridors. That it meant me no good I assumed as a matter of course. I broke out in a sweat and leaned against the wall, suddenly very tired and very afraid.

Something akin to an electric shock instantly propelled me forward, leaving me to stare wildly at the wall, wondering what could have stung me. Was that the word? *Stung*? "What the fuck's going on?" I knew it was supposed to be a sign of mental illness to talk to myself, but arguably so was running off with a sexy Italian barista to find her crazy witch-cult mother. I had problems any which way.

"Shit." I sank to my knees, not from desperation, exactly, but more from an idea that it was a sound defensive position to take against the thing if and when it came back. I twisted my shirt into a whip, thinking that there were crazier assumptions to make than that I was up against a giant cockroach. Was I in a fucking nightmare? Was Antonia even real? Was the thing? Was I even in the hotel? I thought about tossing myself against the wall in an effort to wake, but I didn't want to risk touching those flowers again.

If nothing else, I had to find out what was behind that door. "Famous last words, my ass," I muttered to myself, and knocked on the door.

My heart stopped for maybe the third or fourth time that night. I heard

all manner of noises from behind that door. Rustling. Murmuring.

Scuttling. The same scuttling I'd heard from the thing. I rolled up my trusty shirt-whip in my right hand, ready for action.

The door opened, and I locked eyes with one of the most extraordinary-looking women I'd ever seen in my life. My first wholly irreverent impression was that she reminded me of my art teacher in junior high. I think the only similarity was how I could tell they regarded their fellow humans with amused condescension at best, genocidal contempt at worst. Ms. Walters didn't have a river of lustrous raven black hair running down to her waist in an elegantly caught coiffure, a silver mesh twined within. Ms. Walters didn't prance around in an incredibly low-cut red velvet evening gown with wicked black leather gloves covering her hands.

She noticed where my eyes had landed and favored me with a mischievous smile.

"May I help you?" she asked in a rich contralto - in English.

"How'd you know I speak English?"

"Many things are obvious to me."

"Uh-huh. Where's Antonia?"

"You mean my daughter?"

"*You're* Antonia's mother?"

"In the flesh. Please come in."

I followed her into a large sitting-room, decorated similar to the hallway in many respects. It had been crammed full of incredibly ornate Victorian furniture—tables, chairs, lamps, pieces whose function I couldn't guess. The weird smell I'd noticed in the hallway multiplied in intensity, sending me reeling a little.

The walls had flowers on them.

"What is that smell?"

"Good taste. Please be seated."

"Where's Antonia?"

"Would you like a drink? Some wine, perhaps?" She picked up a glass from a lampstand, filled with some smoky yellowish substance.

"Pinot Grigio? No thanks. I'd like to know where Antonia is. *Please*." Maybe she was controlled by a witch-cult, but there was never any harm in saying the magic word.

The woman inclined her head in acknowledgement. "She is resting." Her eyes glowed strangely. "She rests for what must come."

"I'd like to see her, please. How did she get in here?"

The woman laughed lightly. "One needs no special powers to open a door."

"Not all doors are the same." Oh, *that* was cool, I thought, smugly congratulating myself for being relatively inscrutable.

"Indeed not. All the same, she is here, and that is what matters to you.

You are concerned for my daughter, yes?"

"Yes. I… really care for her greatly." I suddenly realised that I hadn't cared that much about anyone else in ages. "I want to see her."

"In good time. When she has woken. You are American?"

"Yeah."

"I visited Chicago as a small child."

"Really? I've been there." I wasn't sure what to say or whether she'd be interested in my impressions of the *Gigglesnort Hotel* exhibit at the Broadcast Museum. I wanted to see Antonia. I wanted to take her away from that place—if she was really there—and take her away from this crazy mother of hers—if the woman was really her mother.

Out of desperation, I stuck out my hand. "I'm Franklin."

She regarded it as she might an unusually harmless snake. "I am Giulietta."

"Nice to meet you, Giulietta."

"Do you want to make love to my daughter?" Her question only took me aback for a few seconds. Her whole manner, acting the hostess but behaving like a drunken sorority girl at a keg party, waving that wine glass in front of me like a hypnotist's pocketwatch, put me on edge to an extent I'd never felt before.

"I would, actually. I think she's very special."

I could have sworn I'd seen a flicker of something genuine in her eyes.

"Perhaps you will get the chance. After all, you are a foreigner, you seem to have some money, and I expect you can indulge her in false flattery."

"Giulietta, you can insult me all you want, but I'm not leaving here until I've seen Antonia."

Her wine glass sloshed a little onto the floor in the midst of her laughter.

"Franklin, Franklin…" Her dark eyes boring into me even as she gave me a brilliant smile. "*You're not leaving here at all*."

It took a while for those words and their impact to reach me.

Giulietta needed no time. She leapt from her chair and pinioned my thighs with hers, jamming my right arm behind the chair with her left hand and my left with her right elbow.

"Open wide," she hissed, savagely head-butting me and pouring the wine into my mouth, slackjawed in pain and shock. I choked as best I could on the acrid, sickly–sweet liquid, which seemed in some way to have the same feel as the scent of the hallway and the room, only this time in taste rather than smell. Even as I knew some had made it down the hatch, I began to feel woozy and disoriented.

Giulietta stood up, a gloating expression on her haughty face. "You will see her soon enough."

I stood and tried to confront her in some way, but only stumbled against the wall, reaching out to steady myself. I forgot that there were flowers on the wall, and swiftly withdrew my hand in answer to the painful sting I received.

"Merely a taste, Franklin, merely a taste of his power," she told me, folding her arms and beaming smugly down upon me.

I crashed to the floor through the table, feeling only slight discomfort, an effect I attributed to whatever drug she'd given me. As I lost consciousness, I heard scuttling and a hungry *sniffing*…

"No, Lord! The ceremony must take precedence!" The voice wasn't Giulietta's.

I woke in a comfortable, plush chair in a refreshingly larger room than the one in which I'd lost consciousness.

"So, the little *cavaliere serviente* awakes. Antonia's dear young man regains his senses…in a manner of speaking."

It was a female voice, light as air. Without seeing the speaker—my vision was still a little blurry—the impression was of a dagger, shiny, beautiful and artfully designed, yet capable of slicing flesh and bone and ending a life as quick as a sneeze. I'd never actually seen a dagger, but I'd read about them.

I'd also read about witches, and if the woman who gradually resolved herself before me wasn't one, it would have been a surprise. Tall and slim, with a close-cropped mop of ash-blonde hair, she looked like a meek and mousy music teacher, but I could tell, even at a distance of about nine feet or so, that every vein and sinew in her body was alive with power I'd never felt before, much like that I'd experienced from the flowers on the wall. She wore a simple red gown, long and unadorned, but such simplicity failed to disguise her unbearably formidable essence.

"Welcome, sir. Welcome to the Naiade. Your stay with us will be short but we shall try to make it as comfortable as possible." Her English was almost flawless, the kind I heard on the BBC World News but deeper and richer.

"Thank you," I wheezed, still winded from the drug. "Who are you? Where's Antonia?"

"She waits for you in the next room." Her lips parted in a lascivious smirk. "She is eager."

"Eager?" I sat up and managed to get my bearings. The room was definitely bigger than the sitting-room, but there were differences in decoration. The walls were blood-red, lit by an eerie glow that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once, although I got the impression that the woman provided its source. Giulietta stood off to her side, head bowed in an unholy reverence. There was no furniture to speak of apart

from my chair, and I noticed once more that the walls were covered in flowers, but blooms of a much lighter violet which stood out from the red in a queasy symbiosis.

The woman stood before an alcove, covered by a drape I hadn't noticed before.

"We offer you a choice, Franklin."

"Choice? Choice for what?"

"This house is dying, Franklin. It has lived, in one form or another, for centuries. And now…it dies." The woman inclined her head sadly.

"Before anything else happens, you'll have to explain things to me." I had to know.

"Very well." She favored me with a thin smile. Approval? As with Giulietta, it was hard to tell. "This house—this property—belonged to Giacamo Carcara, a sorcerer of great power and skill, when Alessandro Borgia was Pope." So about five hundred years, although I didn't let on that I knew that. "Carcara—him we call 'Lord'—loved his palazzo as if it were his mistress, and showered favors and adoration upon it. When he grew old and ready to die, he could hardly abide parting from it. He…transferred his soul into the matter of the building."

"*What*?"

"I see you can scarcely credit such feats. And yet it happened. Giacomo Carcara has dwelt within this building as one, as a man with his wife, these five long centuries. His spirit exalts the timbers, the halls… even the flowers on the walls."

"But…but this hotel hasn't been here since the sixteenth century…"

"No." She grimaced. "In the changes and obscenities to tradition and the natural order that came some decades ago, the property's new 'owner'," here she pronounced the word with spittle, "decided 'renovations' were necessary to maintain his family's prosperity. The façade was destroyed, for the most part, and the palazzo was trumpeted from one end of Rome to the other as a 'window to the future.' The future!" she hissed.

I just sat slackjawed and let her continue.

"He paid," she snarled. "He put gargoyles on the elevators to counter the Lord's will, not that it helped. He tore at his hair and rent at his clothes in a frenzy that Carcara would bring him and his family down. And so he did."

"Why is this place dying, then?"

"For lack of love—of desire. None have lived in the building for years now. Only the old and infirm, whose wants our Lord finds flaccid and repellent, still eke out a living in the lower floors. Our Lord wanes through lack of heat, lack of passion. He craves ignition, incandescence."

I associated neither with my own personality. "Well… where do I come into this?"

"All we ask from you is a choice."

"What kind of choice?"

"The choice between life and death."

I sat mute for a time. All my reservations and hidden mockery of Antonia's worries regarding magic shrank into insignificance. If I wasn't dealing with the real thing, I was definitely dealing with a bunch of creepy psychos who had kidnapped Antonia and were capable of anything.

"All right." I finally replied. "What does this choice involve?"

The woman laughed as low as she could, a disconcerting sound given how high her voice was.

"You, Franklin, may walk out of here a free man, and with riches our Lord can still provide, if you willingly leave knowing another will die in your place. If you disapprove strongly enough, you will die. On the one hand, heroic self-sacrifice, passion undoubted, and on the other, calculating self-preservation, passion underrated. Which will you choose?"

"Okay." Trying to ignore the chills that washed over me at the easy talk of my death, I decided to handle the whole thing by ear. "I'll let you know my decision… presently." I'd seen enough movies to know that playing for time was a good idea. I think I managed to disguise my growing terror—at least from *me*. "How did y'all choose me?"

"Your curiosity does you credit. We knew Antonia would attempt to find her beloved mother at some point, and she's far too intelligent a girl to venture into danger unaided. What we couldn't have foreseen was that you would appear and agree to help her. It was very chivalrous, Franklin, for which I honestly esteem you. It also provided us with an unmatchable opportunity for our Lord's survival. You may, of course, allow our victim's blood to replenish our Lord's nourishment, but more powerful—much, much more powerful—is the voluntary desire for self-sacrifice to save another."

So that was it. They'd kill me or some other poor, dumb bastard, all to satisfy this psychotic delusion that the hotel was alive and ailing. There was actually part of me that found this impressive—a miniscule, demented part.

"Who else did you have in mind?"

"Caterina!" she cried.

A beautiful young girl appeared from behind the draped alcove in the wall, dressed in a red gown similar to the witch's, and with similar fair hair, but long, a rich flood of pale gold. She fixed me with a clear, crystal blue gaze of such serenity that I wondered if she'd been drugged.

"Caterina will take your place if you falter. Does her beauty not move you, Franklin? Does her youth mean nothing to you? The promise of life she has before her? You would trade this jewel for the dreary, grubby life

to which you must return across the ocean? You cannot fool me, Franklin, for I can see through you as through a window. The mournful eloquence in your eyes speaks volumes. You joke and chatter and drink and come to the rescue of poor, motherless maidens, all for nothing, for you know it will avail you nothing. Why do you do it, then? There can be only one answer—to postpone the inevitable end. In your struggles you seek to evade the loneliness and decay that is your lot more than anyone else's. Have you never felt that, Franklin? That you and you alone suffer greater anguish than anyone? I can see you have. I can offer what you truly desire: the end, a swift, relatively painless end to a painful and interminable solitude that slowly destroys you."

There wasn't any point in contradicting her. I was still trying to think of a "plan." In any event, maybe she was right. I looked into her cold eyes and knew that she saw more than I did, that whatever delusions she cherished concerning magical powers, the hotel's state of existence, or life in general, she certainly held a measure—if not *the* measure—of me.

"Is that not enough? You will find, before the evening ends, that we can be very persuasive." She sighed deeply, a little in exasperation, I thought. "You may have Caterina."

I watched dumbfounded while Caterina, as in a trance, began to slowly divest herself of the gown. Her disrobing took on the aura of a striptease. I'd actually never seen one, and it was something new, watching a woman shed her clothes in front of me in what amounted to slow motion. Tights, bra, panties… I watched a butterfly come out of the chrysalis.

"It's not such a strange thing, is it, Franklin? One night of pleasure in exchange for the rest of her life? Surely even a gallant *cavaliere* such as yourself can see chivalry in such a trade. It is a serious matter indeed when I offer my daughter to a total stranger."

Even after the striptease, I still found the strength to marvel at it all. The walls became wine, inundating and intoxicating. The flowers seemed to leap out at me with their malevolent presence and sickly violet coloring. Caterina swam in my vision like the hotel's namesake, eldritch and alluring. She came so close that I could smell the aroma from between her legs, the cold sweat that covered her naked body. I could almost see the fine veins in her eyes and the tiny, almost invisible golden hairs that rounded the nipples on her round, generous breasts, presented for my inspection like I was the master of a seraglio. For practically any other straight guy, it was fantasy made flesh. For me at that moment, it was a nightmare from which I'd probably never awake.

"Just think, Franklin. A swift dispatch and an hour of the most divine ecstasy." She paused. "Well, maybe not an *hour*—I can't see *everything*."

If I wasn't being threatened with human sacrifice, I might have found

that very funny. A tiny smirk crossed my lips and gave me the strength to answer.

"Maybe…maybe I don't *want* the hotel to survive. You ever think of that? Maybe it's the ugliest fucking place I've ever seen." That definitely wasn't true. "Maybe it should be put out of its misery. What the hell did this Carcara guy do to deserve immortality? Why should I care about him? Hell, what if you're wrong? What if there's nothing special about this place and killing us won't do shit? I'm not gonna help you do this! You're out of your mind! I thought so at first but now I'm *absolutely fucking sure*. I may not look like much, but if you think I'm gonna let you kill her, or me, or Antonia, or even *her*," I nearly yelled, rising up and pointing a finger at Giulietta that looked downright accusatory, "you're more insane than I thought." I paused, my steam running out. "And *that's* pretty crazy." The hypnotic effect of Caterina's body had worn off and its evaporation left me giddy, like the stinging headache I had after a fever break.

The witch smiled, cocking her head sideways and studying me like I was a tuatara.

"Let, let, let. Such funny notions you have, Franklin."

I clenched my fists. "Where's Antonia?"

"She'll come when she comes." The witch began a weird, silent murmuring.

I couldn't move. Wondering if it was simply fear that restrained me, I tried again. Still immobile, I looked down to see what was wrong with my legs.

Encircling both was a tangle of vines that sprouted bright violet flowers.

I screamed and tripped to the floor, my hands barely breaking my fall. The vines gripped tighter as I felt dim shocks knife through the denim of my jeans.

They sprouted from the walls, with a rustling and a *scuttling*. *The fucking wallpaper had come alive*.

My eyes widened in terror as my mind went through all the rational explanations before realizing that there weren't any. Somehow, despite all the evidence, despite everything I had ever believed, the hotel really was a five-hundred-year-old magician and the witch was in deadlier earnest than I could imagine.

Anything was possible. I could die.

I lunged for the alcove, only to get a nastier shock—the vines and flowers cut deeper into my leg.

"Franklin, don't think that I fail to respect your resistance—your vigor." The witch smiled, and I could really believe she meant it. "This is what we want—this passion, this burning desire to do good."

"Forget it!" Would she actually be able to kill her daughter? I decided to call her bluff. "I refuse!"

"Ah." The combined satisfaction and disappointment in her voice actually hurt. "I feared this might happen." She nodded her head and Caterina withdrew beyond the alcove, taking her discarded clothing with her. "We shall have to find other inducements to convince you."

"What else are you gonna do to me?" My voice was frantic. "Torture me? How is that *voluntary*?"

"Oh, you'll see," she replied lazily in a way that frightened me to the core. "Caterina!"

"If I hadn't taken that bait, I don't see what else she can do."

"If you will not yield yourself for my daughter…"

Caterina, clothed again, brought out Antonia, who trod hesitantly into the room, quaking in fear.

"Perhaps you will yield for another's," she almost hissed.

I wrenched my head away from her imperious figure to stare at Antonia. She had been crying, obviously mortified by her mother's participation in this insanity. I was so captivated by the horrible beauty our predicament wrought on her face that I failed to realize for a second the meaning of the witch's words.

"Oh…*fuck*." I'd called her bluff, and she'd called mine.

"NO!!" Giulietta's piercing scream reminded us all that she was still there. She broke her zombie posture and rushed before the witch, her painstakingly styled hair coming loose. There followed a torrent of impassioned Italian from which I could gather her opposition to her daughter's being sacrificed, and that the witch was called "Galatea."

Galatea answered back, her palpable contempt and ferocious desire on Carcara's behalf transcending all language barriers. I thought furiously on we would escape. I wondered why Antonia didn't try to do anything and then remembered the vines that still held my legs.

The witches' argument escalated. As it did so, I noticed something strange happen to the room.

The air seemed to twist and shimmer, much as it had when Antonia and I had first taken the elevator to that accursed floor, but here there was a different quality. The original pattern had been confident, even arrogant—the satisfied, expectant spider drawing the fly. Now things had changed. Something was wrong. Galatea must have assumed Giulietta would be as willing to give up her own daughter as she was. The ceremony wasn't going according to plan.

Carcara was *frightened*.

I tugged my leg a few times and the vines loosened. They were confused. After a few moments, they withered - they didn't recognize their prey or didn't sense it mattered. My foot came loose and I crawled at top

speed over to Antonia.

Caterina hissed and lunged at me, hands outstretched to take my throat. I shot up my head, taking her on the chin and sending her reeling against the wall. Now knowing that she functioned as Antonia's "guard," I found myself cruelly gratified to see her collapse in pain on the floor from the flowers' shock.

I got to my feet and took Antonia in my arms, clutching her like I would the old security blanket.

"Are you all right?" I asked through gritted teeth—the pain from the flowers still throbbed in my leg.

She nodded wordlessly, squeezing my hand, her eyes wide and focused on the witches.

Giulietta and Galatea faced each other in hateful majesty, their argument apparently finished. No sooner had their invective ceased than the vines began to rustle again and scuttle from the wall with no apparent object in mind. Antonia and I backed slowly away from the two until we heard a sound more horrifying and appalling than I had ever heard.

A colossal sniffing began to shake the room, the sniffs of a diner smelling for the flavors in his food, of a predator hunting his prey. Only when I realized that there were none besides us in the room did I know that the sniffing came from Giacomo Carcara—the ancient magician ached for his sacrifice and finally, after satisfaction had come so close and then cruelly retreated with Giulietta's defiance, *snapped*.

Antonia and I clutched each other in terror at the demonic sound.

"Oh my God."

"We have to get my mother out of here."

"*How*?" I knew she had no intention of leaving without her mother, but the latter still held her ground against Galatea, who remained motionless.

The sniffing grew louder and coupled with the scuttling as the vines started to detach themselves from the walls and swing wildly across the room like whips, their master having lost control of his senses. Antonia and I shrunk from them as best we could, trying to reach the door before they could reach us.

We nearly made it. Antonia got to the door, but one of the evil tendrils lassoed my ankle and sent me to the floor before I was free. I spun on my back, trying to kick loose and ignore the pain. Antonia grabbed my arms to drag me away.

The mutual hypnosis between Giulietta and Galatea seemed to dissolve as the two witches realized their master's insanity. The sniffing and the rustling and the scuttling formed the parts of an infernal orchestra whose music I knew would haunt my nightmares until I died. The chamber's strange luminosity shifted to a violet that seemed to plunge

Carcara's makeshift temple into a photo darkroom.

Everyone had forgotten Caterina until we heard her screams.

She had fallen where the vines were thickest, forming a twisting mass of green and violet against her body, where the fabric of the gown mixed with her blood of the same color. The vines had pinned her to the wall and wrapped so tight around her body that they cut through the cloth of her gown and into her flesh. A horrible sucking sound told us that the vines were *absorbing her blood*. Any nourishment would now do for the undead Carcara. She managed to gather her strength for one last gesture: stretching an arm to summon help before the vines pressed her further back against the wall, finally crushing the life from her and battening on her sinking, wasted corpse.

Antonia faintly whimpered. I didn't even have the strength to do that.

I broke out in clammy sweat as a new sound arrived: a demented, nonsensical ululation of gibberish from nowhere in particular, which I knew had to be Giacomo Carcara—howling with laughter, glee, and a gourmand's delight at his random, bloodcurdling feast. Even with Antonia's hands clutching mine, I drew both against my ears to block out his disgusting merriment.

Carcara's mocking hilarity fixed our gaze to the spot where Caterina's body slowly and awfully dissolved into the pulsating mass of homicidal greenery. Mesmerized by fear, I let Antonia hold my arms, neither pulling nor letting go, as she, too, couldn't tear her gaze away from the hellish spectacle.

A scream tore the air, the harsh, wounded shriek of someone hurt worse then they ever thought they could be. It was Galatea.

She stood with only the barest tremble displaying the utter devastation brought on her world. Her eyes were dark, baleful moons, fixed with outrage and an exponentially growing hatred for her former master.

She howled, a burst of betrayed contempt in Italian that, thanks to my admittedly limited pre-voyage preparation, I was able to understand.

"I owe you nothing!! *Nothing*!!"

In that instant, I forgave her everything. She had been willing to sacrifice me; she had probably been willing to sacrifice Antonia. Now, though, as she faced our tormentor with fists clenched and a palpable power building all around her, I knew she had already paid more for her crimes than she ever could.

Giulietta, such a desperate enemy moments before, came to Galatea's side and gently touched her arm. She said something and Galatea almost staggered against her, moaning softly.

The vines' hold slackened, and Antonia pulled me free. I fell into her and grabbed her tight, burying my face in her shoulder, kissing her on her neck, her cheek, her hair, making certain she was solid and alive and not

part of this fucking tortuous hallucination.

"Jesus…Jesus Fucking Christ," I sobbed, gritting my teeth.

Antonia said nothing, holding me fiercely and brushing her tears on my nose.

The infernal laughter stopped. Carcara, apparently bereft of the kind of vision that would have allowed it (hardly "him" any longer) to visualize the intolerable expression on Galatea's face, belatedly realized something else was wrong.

"We have to get out of here," I whispered to Antonia.

"Not without my mother! *Mamma*!"

Giulietta turned to her daughter and expressed her love with a look that I never, *ever* want to see on a human face again. She stroked Galatea's bare arm and sadly shook her head.

"*Andate*." Her eyes flitted over to me. "Thank you," she said, a sob grabbing in her throat.

I couldn't do anything, really, except nod like an idiot.

It was now Antonia's turn to urge. "Let's go. Franklin," she pleaded, "let's go."

"We can't do anything to help?"

"No." The misery in her voice almost killed me. "No."

The vines made no attempt to lash at us as we made for the door. As we left, I turned around like Lot's wife for one last look at applied evil.

Giulietta and Galatea stood, holding hands, scaring the shit out of the vines and investing the horrid room with a deadly quiet. Intent on coming battle, Giulietta stared at nothing in particular with an undead glower, but my unavoidable gape caught Galatea's eyes in a moment that haunted me forever after.

The barest hint of a smirk touched her mouth, and she arched an eyebrow.

"Goodbye, children," she said in English. "You probably have about five minutes."

We barreled out of there instantly, young life and love taking the sound advice of wiser elders.

The elevator took *forever*.

We made it out of the Naiade. I can only guess that Carcara sensed his followers' revolt and, even in the depths of his insanity, realized it was sound judgment to marshal his energies to face his opponents.

Antonia and I were at the edge of the barren environs when we heard the cracking and the scream.

The noise set us shaking against the edge of some pawnshop or other, and we sank to the ground, trembling in each others' arms, watching the end with impotent shock.

The building stood absolutely still for a minute, sending a thrill of foreboding through my body. I felt it in Antonia, too. Something had to happen—something grand and terrible. We suffered through a lifetime of nothing as I held her closer and closer.

The Naiade shrank in on itself—that's the only way I know how to put it. The steel and glass exterior twisted a little before much of the glass shattered, showering all over the barren edge. If we hadn't been on the fringes, we'd probably have been sliced to pieces. The ground shook underneath, radiating outward in ripples that reached us and some of the surrounding buildings. Red glows appeared in and around the seventh floor, accompanied by cracks that came from no structural defect. The glows inked the encompassing air for a good twenty feet, accompanied by a shimmering that dwarfed the phenomena within the hotel in size and power. It looked as though the upper floors had caught fire.

The hotel screamed—a great shuddering moan that ascended to a full-on, cataclysmic shriek. Other people would have had to hear that. The sparks and shimmers around the top moved in unison with the scream, expanding further and then retracting as the scream itself waned into a piteous whine, finally wizening into an anticlimactic squeak.

That was it.

We kept our eyes closed well into the shattered silence. I was horrified to think of what might come next.

The hotel still stood in the center of the ruined zone, but dark and silent, as if the night had leached away all the light and sound. The fires on the upper floor had vanished, and there was no smoke to be seen. The early morning sky was stark and clear. We could see no remaining trace of the rebellion raised by Carcara's disciples.

I realized that Antonia was shaking, her soft, muffled sobs rocking us both and gently punctuating the hushed field.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded, blinking away tears and wiping her face with her forearm.

"Do you think it's safe to go in?"

"Safe," she threw back in my face, harsh and mocking. "She's not safe. She's dead."

"Shouldn't we go and look?" I had to say it, even knowing she was right. "What about the others? The ones living on the lower floors?"

Antonia pointed wearily towards the hotel. A couple of lights now gleamed from the first and second floors. An old man in pajamas had appeared, looking up towards the darkened top of the hotel.

We forced ourselves to walk over and ask what had happened.

The old man led us hesitantly into the hotel, where several of its elderly residents on the lower levels had left their rooms and milled about in confusion and anxiety.

"He says there has been much trouble with the electrical and plumbing systems recently," Antonia explained, translating the old man's raspy baritone. "No one goes up to the higher floors anymore, and they don't know anyone who lives there. The noises gave them a fright. He asks if we will accompany him upstairs to see what has happened." She smiled cheerlessly. "He is nervous."

"Are you up to it?"

She nodded. "Franklin, I have to see."

I squeezed her hand. "So do I."

The old man led us towards the elevator.

"He says this place has always been notorious for strange occurrences. It used to be a palazzo, you know. Many believe it has been haunted ever since its renovation by the original owner, a Signore Carcara, who was rumored to be a powerful sorcerer living in the time of the Renaissance…" Her mechanical, emotionless delivery of the old man's terrified babble cut me to the quick; it physically hurt to hear her devastation. I reached over to pull her next to me and embrace her. She didn't pull away, but she didn't join in my movement, simply shuffling along like a gorgeous worker drone.

The old man reached out a trembling, wizened forefinger to press the button for the seventh floor.

A chill went up my spine at the thought that there might be something in the elevator. Antonia held me close, looking into my eyes.

"I think it'll be all right, you know." She used her normal voice and I knew that, whatever happened, she'd be all right in the end.

The elevator doors opened.

Inside, the walls were gleaming stainless steel and white plastic, the same décor as the lobby. The gargoyles had vanished and the place smelled of… nothing.

"What the fuck?"

The seventh floor and the rooms were the exact same. No vines on the walls, no mysterious smells, no phantasmagoric color scheme, no Caterina, no Galatea, no Giulietta… no Carcara.

The old man went to call the police and we found ourselves alone in the erstwhile sacrificial chamber to the palazzo's former owner. Antonia walked away, towards where her mother had probably been standing. I sensed she wanted space.

"She thought it was worthwhile, Franklin. She had to."

"You think he's gone?"

She turned towards me, with tears running down her face and a fierce

smile. “Yes.”

We gave stories to the police, two kids making out when suddenly this hotel, like, bursts into flame and then nothing. “I mean, *what the fuck*?” The officer nodded politely, hoped I enjoyed the brief remainder of my stay in Italy and reminded me of the excellent extradition arrangements his beautiful country maintained with the United States.

Antonia burst into tears on our way out of the neighborhood and I held her for a good long while. She didn’t want to be alone, so we went back to my hotel room. Her flat, she said, would have reminded her of her mother. The clerk gave us an odd look as we entered the lobby and marched over to the elevator, but we’d been through a lot worse that night.

We made love, but gently and placidly, more as a memorial service for what her mother’s passing had meant than anything else. I told myself, “life goes on,” but I still have guilt stored from that night. Afterward, I gave her a series of light massages as I listened to stories of her mother from childhood. At length, I couldn’t take any more and I lay down beside her, taking her in my arms as we cried into the dawn, trembling with our now shared memories.

I left that afternoon. I hadn’t been to sleep, and she went with me to check out of the hotel and grab some breakfast before I entered the interminable security check.

“I want to take you home with me.”

Antonia smiled bleakly. “I’m not a war orphan, Franklin.” She paced up and down outside the terminal with me. I was postponing departure as much as possible. “I’ll be all right, you know. My stepfather will probably be a lot better now that this has happened, horribly enough. We can always write or email.”

“Yeah.” I looked at my shoes, then at her. “I think I might have actually done it. I never got the chance to find out.”

“Done what?”

“Given myself up. So they’d let you go.”

She smiled and we kissed for the last time. “I believe you.”

As the plane left the ground later that day, I came to believe she actually did, smiled, and settled down to sleep, dreading the vines and the scuttling I knew were on their way into my nightmares.

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The British Horror Films website
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Started in 2000 as a testament to one man's obsession with the 1973 film *Horror Hospital*, the British Horror Films website has grown into one of the top three horror film websites in the world*.

It features hundreds of lighthearted reviews of genre films shot on or funded from these isles, from the sublime (*Dead Of Night*) to the ridiculous (the aforementioned *Horror Hospital*). Films from esteemed companies such as Hammer and Amicus rub shoulders with forgotten trash from the 70s and 80s, all described in wonderful detail but with the reviewer's tongue firmly in his cheek.

The site also features a burgeoning online community with more than 1,000 members, all fans of British horror, and all very friendly.

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Gory tales from England's gaols IV

MY good friend Colonel Chambers had finally agreed to my suggestion that the pair of us might work together, following the successful outcomes of his previous cases, which I am glad to report had been concluded most satisfactorily.

I would like to also report that these outcomes had been in the main due to my input, but as has been seen in our recent correspondence, my own input was of a small scale. Small, but as the Colonel had pointed out on many an evening, vitally important. However, the case we were about to embark on, the first as partners in the truer sense of the word, would prove to be the most baffling. And, as you most probably know, dear reader, would have the strangest denouement of them all. But I am here to push aside the rhetoric of the gutter press, and to report what actually happened on that terrible, fateful night in East London.

I fear I am wandering slightly from the point, and I hope you will forgive the occasional fancies that my fevered mind might bestow upon this narrative. For time, as they say, is short, and I feel I must complete my transcript of this case as quickly as possible. So take heart, dear Ambrose, and set your splintered mind on putting forward the facts as they stand. As they were. As they truly were. Oh God, help me.

I shall begin again. My name is Ambrose Dubois. I had not long arrived in London when I fell under the protective wing of Colonel Sebastian Chambers, late of the Queen's 51st Dragoons. The Colonel, as I was instructed to call him, was a bear of a man, almost seven feet tall and as powerfully built as a Shire horse, but with a temper more akin to a raging bull. At the time he was a leading light in the London social scene, his overbearing presence, quick wit and exuberant charm drawing men and women to him like moths to a gas lamp. But, dear reader, I am sure you know all this, having read my detailed account of our first adventure together, *The Case Of The Tattered Tongue*. Suffice to say that he saw me being thrown out of a public house for non-payment of rent and took pity on the poor, tiny wretch that I was, taking me back to his beautifully appointed home and allowing me free board and lodging for as long as I needed. Some might call him a boar and a bully, but he never showed me anything but the utmost kindness. And with that kindness came a willingness to teach. Oh, the *things* I learned.

The Colonel, his mind constantly ablaze with thought and suggestion, found that he took uneasily to life after service, and refused to become what he referred to as "one of those whisky-sodden, fat-bottomed leeches" he saw at his club "forever lost in their tedious anecdotes about army life". The Colonel never discussed his own career, which by all accounts was filled with astonishing acts of bravery and derring-do. Often I begged and pleaded with him to talk through his tales of his heroics, so that I might transcribe them for the public at large, as I did with our cases. But his answer was always the same. "Amby," he would murmur, his huge moustache bristling as he spoke, "twas a time of great bravery by many, many men. What I achieved paled into insignificance compared to the sacrifices given by many a common soldier. It would defile their paupers' graves if I were to crow about my own experiences, whilst they rot under the ground in some far flung land."

And that would be an end to it. So instead I would content myself with transcribing, for his adoring public at large, the exact and perfect details of his many detective cases, from both before and after I made his acquaintance. Who could forget the way the Colonel's razor-sharp intellect sliced through the befuddling complexities of *The Bloodied Puzzle-Box*, or how he managed to retain his mental

balance whilst combating *The Six-Fingered Chinaman*? And who, but I, his faithful ward and companion these six years past, was qualified to pass them on in written form? It was because of the closeness of our bond that I had begged and pleaded with him to make our situation a more permanent one. And that he had done. We were partners now, in the true and legal sense of the phrase. It was there for all to see, writ large in golden letters on the glass door of our office – Chambers & Dubois, Detection Agency.

The Case Of The Locked Room was to be our first case as partners. As it turned out, it was also to be our last.

As was often the way, we were approached in the first instance by Her Majesty's Constabulary. Or to be more precise, Inspector Bertrand Smythe of Scotland Yard. Smythe had long been a friend and admirer of the Colonel, and often turned to him for help and advice when the complexities of a crime proved too labyrinthine for the more serious and straightforward minds of our esteemed law enforcers. Many was the night the pair of them had locked themselves away in the Colonel's office, often for hours at a time, to ponder the intricacies of some clue or scrap of evidence. I had oftentimes sat outside the solid door, desperate just to be able to view their heaving brows as they sweated out the problem. And in fact, I had high hopes that as a bona fide Partner in the Colonel's business, I might be party to their rigours from that point on. Alas it was not to be.

But my mind is wandering again, dear reader. I can only apologise, and hope that the reason for my butterfly-like flitting from the subject at hand will become clear as the terrible tale progresses. So, as I have already alluded to, Inspector Smythe was shown into our office as usual by Barnes, the Colonel's manservant. The Inspector's usually cheery and ruddy-cheeked face was markedly pale and drawn, his mouth uncharacteristically tight-lipped and unsmiling. The shadows under his eyes and the stubble on his chin betrayed that he had not slept that night. I knew he had come to see us on a matter of grave importance when he waved away Barnes' offer of tea, sat down unbidden on our *chaise long* and began his story without preamble.

"Colonel Chambers," he began, without allusion to myself, despite my presence in the room. I comforted my bruised ego by reminding myself that it had been but one day since the Colonel had added my nomenclature to the title of the business. "We are desperate for your help. We have on our books a murder so foul, so depraved, that it hardly bears thinking about. Yet think about it we must, as it appears almost unsolvable. We have no clue as to the identity of the perpetrator, and even worse, we have even less idea of how the crime could have been committed. It is a pretty state of affairs, let me tell you. I am at my wit's end. The murder only happened yesterday evening, yet it has myself and all of Scotland Yard so flummoxed that I had to come and see you as soon as possible, as the fiend who committed this act of debauched abandon on another human being must be caught, and caught quickly. I would ask that you put the weight of your intellect to helping solve this crime, and before the trail goes cold."

The Colonel, who was stood leaning against the mantelpiece, his favourite clay pipe clenched between his teeth, fixed his friend with a gimlet eye, and his great voice rolled out from under his moustache like thunder crashing across a storm-ridden sky. "My dear Inspector, I trust that however serious the depredations of the night were, they were not strong enough to cause you to forget your manners completely? In the first instance, you walked into a man's home without so much as a 'hail fellow, well met'. In the second, you failed to acknowledge my partner," I have to record here that I bristled with pride as my friend referred to me as such, "and in the third, you appear to have begun your story *somewhere in the middle*!"

His voice was rising as he spoke, in the way that it always did when his temper was riled. I had seen grown men – huge, bearded working men with faces as hard as granite and forearms like the boughs of a tree – actually reduced to tears by the

full force of one of the Colonel's tongue-lashings. I was once reliably informed that he had managed to halt an out-of-control handsome cab simply by standing in the path of the stampeding horse and berating it at full volume.

The Inspector quailed under this onslaught, and immediately leapt to his feet, at the same time removing his hat and clutching it to his chest. "I am sorry, Colonel," he stuttered. "But it has truly been a night to make a man forget the niceties of social intercourse. If you had seen what I have seen…"

"That is as maybe, Inspector," the Colonel interjected, "but I will not have bad manners shown within the confines of my home, whatever the context. You are our guest here. Pray behave like one."

The Inspector bowed his head and apologised, then turned to me, a strange smile playing upon his lips. "And my apologies to you too, young Amby. So, you've finally made it all legal and above board, eh?"

At this he tipped me a wink. I did not much care for his inference or off-hand manner to someone, who despite his young years, was now an important cog in the machine of London criminal investigation, but I chose to remain silent. If the Colonel saw anything off-colour in the Inspector's remark, he chose to ignore it. He stepped forward and gave the policeman a hearty slap on the back, laughing lustily as he did so.

"There, that wasn't so hard, was it old chap? Now, pray be seated and tell us everything – beginning at the very beginning. Leave nothing out. Barnes, fetch us all some tea and toast. The Inspector looks just about done in."

Barnes, who had remained skulking at the door since ushering the Inspector in, scurried off to do his master's bidding. It is fair to say I never had much time for Barnes. I can say that now, without fear of repercussion.

The Inspector re-took his seat, and the Colonel pulled up his favourite high-backed leather armchair and sat before him. I remained where I was, standing next to the window, happy to be a part of the proceedings. The Inspector cleared his throat, and began his tale.

"I received a note requesting my attendance at ———— Street in the East End at about nine o'clock yesterday evening. The note was brought by a maid from the home of Magnus Rocester, at the request of his wife."

"Magnus Rocester the world-famous industrialist?" asked my friend, his blue eyes glinting.

"The very same," answered the Inspector. "The note explained that sounds of a disturbance had been heard behind the locked door of Rocester's study earlier that evening, and that since then the family and staff had been unable to make contact with him. Fearing the worst, they had sent for the police. But with Rocester being such an important society figure, the powers-that-be had decided that no-one short of an Inspector should deal with the situation. I took a Constable with me – a young chap, probably not much older than young Amby, here – and we set off for ———— Street, arriving about ten minutes later. We were immediately let in and directed to Rocester's study, on the first floor of the house. We arrived on the landing to find a scene of great distress. It appeared that Mrs Rocester had been overcome by the situation and fainted. A maid was screaming her head off, fit to burst. The butler, who was pale-faced and wide-eyed himself, was attempting to comfort her and calm her down, whilst the Rocester's eldest daughter saw to her mother's recumbent form, tears streaming down her face. As you can imagine, the drama of this scene was not what I had expected, from the situation described in the note. I stepped forward to speak to the butler, and immediately saw what it was that had caused this hysteria. And I'm not ashamed to say that it fair chilled my blood to the bones, if you'll pardon the cliché."

At this point in the Inspector's monologue Barnes re-entered the room carrying a silver salver loaded with toasted bread, teacakes and crumpet, all liberally smothered with fast-melting butter, together with an enormous porcelain pot of steaming tea. Barnes poured the Inspector a cup, which the policeman accepted with

thanks. As he took it, I noticed that his hand was shaking quite badly at the memories he was revisiting. Brushing the crumbs from the teacake he was devouring from his moustache, the Colonel prompted him, "Go on, Inspector."

The Inspector looked up, the edge of the cup trembling at his lip. He took a large sip of the invigorating brew and resumed his monologue.

"It was a frightening sight. From under the door which I assumed to be Rocester's study, there poured a deep crimson liquid."

"Blood?" asked the Colonel, steepling his powerful fingers beneath his impressive chin.

"Aye, Colonel, and lots of it. A lake of the stuff, spreading across the floor of the landing. It was no wonder the womenfolk were carrying on so. But an officer of her majesty's police has no time for airs and fancies when there's dirty work afoot. I stepped up to the door, an action which necessitated my standing in the grim puddle, and hammered loudly on the woodwork, shouting at the top of my voice of whom I represented and that anyone within should open the door immediately. There was no response. I repeated my request and grabbed the handle of the door, but it refused to budge. It was firmly and securely locked. I turned to the butler and demanded he fetch a spare key. He informed me that no such item existed. I attempted to peer through the keyhole, but it was blocked from the other side. Realising that time was of the essence, I ordered the young constable with me to put his shoulder to the door. Still it would not open. I examined it more closely, and saw that it was extremely solid in construction – in fact it appeared to be carved from one lump of some kind of black mahogany. The large iron lock was held in place with huge rivets, and the frame surrounding it looked, if anything, of even stronger construction than the door itself. I asked the butler how it might come to be locked from the inside, and he told me that his master was of the habit of sealing himself within his inner sanctum whilst dealing with business. Details of Rocester's entire life's work was held within. Rocester himself possessed the only key, and Rocester was the only man allowed into the room. I enquired of the butler whether there was any other way to gain entry. He replied in the negative. The room was located in the centre of the house, and had no windows. The chimney had been blocked up on his master's request many years ago, the fireplace replaced with a simple wood-burning stove. So terrified was Rocester that his industrial secrets might be stolen that he even suspected a burglar might gain entry as a sweep's boy would perform their job."

The Inspector took another sip of tea. The Colonel did not speak, but I could see from the glint in his cold blue eyes that he was absolutely and completely entranced by the possibilities of this mystery, despite not having heard the entire story. Our guest took a deep breath and carried on.

"Realising that a man's life could be at stake, I demanded that the butler fetch a large axe, and anything else he could lay his hands on which might be of use. Understanding my request perfectly without need for any further elaboration, he left and returned scant minutes later with a great chopping axe, a workman's pick and a lump hammer. Where he got them from so fast is anyone's guess."

"Good butlers like that are few and far between," the Colonel murmured in reply. I could not help but think of how this fine chap sounded like an ideal replacement for Barnes, but I kept my tongue.

"The Constable and I immediately set to work on the door. And my! It was hard work, let me tell you, dear Colonel. We could have done with your strong arms last evening and no mistake. All three of us – the Constable, the butler and I – had worked up a fair sweat before the door was even dented, such was its solidity. But eventually the wood began to give, the lacquer cracking to reveal flesh underneath of the same hue as the liquid which was now congealing at our feet. But it was still going to take us a long time to batter through its solid construction. Then, a stroke of luck. The hinges gave way and the door swung to one side, allowing us to

finally see what had transposed in that most mysterious of rooms."

It was clear that Inspector Smythe was coming to the highlight of his tale. He finished off his cup and placed it gingerly on the ornamental table at his side. Then, with a quick look around to make sure that he was observed by no-one except the Colonel and myself, he whispered: "It was a terrible sight, Colonel. You know as well as anyone that a police officer such as myself sees a fair few sights between inauguration and retirement, more than it befits any sane man to have to view. But I can honestly say that I have never, ever seen the like. Not even during that terrible business during the Autumn of '88."

The Colonel nodded, sagely. The events of that terrible time were still fresh in the minds of every Londoner, their garish and terrible legacy given an added chill with the knowledge that the perpetrator, the devil the press had nicknamed The Ripper, appeared to have escaped Scott free. We all knew the terrible depredations inflicted on the bodies of his five young victims. I must have paled in anticipation of hearing details of the Inspector's gruesome discovery, for the Colonel looked at me, his eyes full of kindness, and said: "Steel yourself, young Amby. If you are to live in my world, you will have to bear witness to the most appalling acts man can commit upon his fellow man."

I nodded, and swallowed hard. The Inspector looked at me from the corner of his eye, rubbed at the stubble on his chin and continued.

"The room was reasonably large – I would say about the same dimensions as the one we now sit in. But unlike this place, which is bright, airy and decorated in the most tasteful way might I say, Rocester's 'inner sanctum' was dark and functional. Bookcases lined the walls, full of ledgers and stacked papers. A desk sat square in the middle, a high-backed leather chair next to the stove, which was burning away merrily and throwing out a tremendous amount of heat. Three oil lamps provided the only illumination, there being not a window or skylight to allow natural light to pervade. There were signs of a struggle – pictures were skewed on the wall, the chair behind the desk was upturned, and books and papers were scattered everywhere. All this I took in, in a moment, it is part of my training. Of course, everyone else's eyes were on that which lay destroyed upon the floor, which the very nature of any man would call upon him to observe. But I know, as you do, sir, that those brief few seconds when you come across the scene of a crime can be the most precious. My eyes drank it all in as I forcibly held back everyone else, lest they disturb something of vital importance to the case. Then I allowed myself to look at the body of Rocester. He was lying on his back upon the floor of the room, one outstretched foot almost touching the remains of the door we had smashed aside. The blood, as I am sure you had already surmised, had poured from the astonishing number of lacerations performed upon his abused body. It is a strange thing that the mind can choose not to accept what is plainly before it. I had to force myself to take in what I was seeing, and as I did so I heard a groan and a rushing of air behind me, followed by a loud thud. My Constable had fainted. I did not berate him for it, he is young and it was a truly terrible sight. To my left I could hear the butler retching. Once again, I could not blame him. The smell alone wafting from the body cavity was truly appalling. The mistress of the house had recovered somewhat and was weakly asking to see her husband. I tore my eyes from the scene in front of me and ordered the daughter and maid to take Mrs Rocester into another room. Such was the volume and power of my request that they obeyed without question."

He bowed his head and took in a deep breath, as if steeling himself for the final hurdle. "Until now I have refrained from describing the finer details of my find, for it pains me to recollect it, so terrible it was. I am sure that it will haunt my dreams for the rest of my natural life, so help me. But I suppose I must recount it, and pray this will be the last time."

"Oh, you must." Whispered the Colonel. "Leave nothing out."

"As I have already recounted, Rocester had fallen onto his back. I

assume that when attacked he had been fully clothed, but the number of lacerations performed on his body had rendered it practically naked. The main injury was a huge gash which ran from his chin to his groin, and his body had been pulled apart as a butcher might split a pig. Every other part of his body – arms, legs, neck, torso, was criss-crossed with deep, jagged cuts. Flaps of skin had been pulled away to reveal the workings underneath. His face was devoid of skin, his open eyes staring from a raw mess of muscle and exposed bone. His ribs stood out white where they had been pulled aside, to allow access to the organs within, which had been removed and scattered about the room. I say scattered, and I mean scattered, not placed. You could see bloody prints where they had hit the walls before falling to their final resting places – on shelves, the desktop, the mantelpiece – one piece of offal was sizzling away atop the glass of a gas lamp, the blood pouring from it casting a ghastly hue over that corner of the room. Ignoring the weak-stomached antics of my associates, I took a step into that hell hole, almost, I now feel, involuntarily, to get a better look at the body. There were white objects scattered across the floor near to his head. I thought at first it was the remains of a necklace, perhaps pulled from the murderer's neck during the struggle. It was only then I realised they were Rocester's teeth, every one of them smashed from his mouth. Only then did thoughts of the murderer bring me to my senses. There was only one place such a fiend could possibly be – here in the room with me! Terror grabbed at my heart with its icy fingers and I stared wide-eyed around the walls, backing into the doorway as I did so. I was unarmed, and whoever had perpetrated this… indescribable deed must surely have a weapon at his disposal, not to mention a state of mind which would give him the added strength of a lunatic. There did not appear to be any place to hide in the room, which made me even more nervous. Where was the murderer hiding? I can tell you, Colonel, I have never been happier than when I heard the sound of boots on the stairwell and was subsequently joined by four more of her majesty's finest."

The Inspector bowed his head and let out a soft sob. The Colonel leant forward and patted him softly on the back. "Thank you, Inspector. I think you have told us everything you can."

The Inspector looked up at him with red-rimmed eyes. "But Colonel Chambers, I haven't…"

The Colonel leapt lightly to his feet and turned towards the fireplace, silencing the policeman with a wave of his hand. "Nonsense. You have finished. There's little more to tell. With your officers you made a nervous search of the room, and found… nothing. No murderer, no murder weapon, no clues as to the identity of the maniac. The key was still in the inside lock of the door. There were no hidden passages behind the book shelves, no trapdoors under the carpet, no blood-soaked dwarves hiding in the coal scuttle. Just a locked room and a very messily murdered businessman."

The Inspector looked astonished. I felt pride swell in my breast at my friend's marvellous deductive reasoning. "But how on earth could you possibly…?" he croaked, surprise preventing him from finishing the question.

The Colonel whirled round to face him once more. "Simple, my friend. If there had been any of these things found, you would not have a mystery on your hands, and you would not have had to call for *me*. Amby, fetch my hat and cane, dear boy. We depart immediately for ———— Street!"

* * *

WE arrived at our destination within the hour. I recall that it was a muggy late August day, rain the previous night had given the cobbles a lustrous shine, but the sky which hung above us was yellow and forbidding. My partner lit from the handsome in his usual athletic manner, leaving me trailing behind struggling with his carpet bag of paraphernalia. He stood for a long moment looking up at number 167, ———— Street, drawing in great lungfuls of stale London air.

The Rocester residence is an impos-

ing building, but unassuming, forming the middle section of a terrace in what is a very fashionable part of town. Its walls are plastered and painted a brilliant white. Looking up at it as we were, it seemed impossible that such horrific events had taken place behind its shining, perfect façade less than 24 hours previously.

The Colonel took the great stone steps to its front door two at a time, and rapped heavily on the woodwork with his cane. Almost immediately it was opened by a sombre faced man, who I deduced to be the butler Smythe had spoken of so glowingly during his interview. We were allowed admittance, and the Colonel eschewed the formality of meeting with the lady of the house, wanting instead to see at first hand the scene of the crime, in all its gory detail. We climbed the impressive curving staircase to the first floor, and the Colonel grunted with satisfaction when he observed that two workmen had been set the task of re-fixing the study door to his frame, as per his instructions, sent by messenger before he left our office.

The workmen were just finishing screwing the huge brass hinges to the thick wood surround. I noticed that their demeanour had none of the usual jollity of such artisans – not for them the cheery whistle or the cheeky grin. Their faces were as pale as alabaster and I noticed that they kept their eyes firmly fixed on the work in hand, standing, as they were, in the doorway to a room which had yet to be cleared of its terrible cargo. I could see the red gashes which bit deep into the inky black veneer, a precursor to what lay beyond.

Within minutes they had finished and tested the door – true enough, it swung quietly back and forth on the hinges and could be locked firmly in place with little effort. "Excellent, excellent," murmured the Colonel, stepping forward to take the large iron key from the taller of the workmen and shooing the pair of them off impatiently.

At this point, the butler stepped forward. "May I ask what you are intending to do, Colonel Chambers?" He asked, a wary look in his eye. "Only, your request seemed a strange one when we received it. Surely the scene of a crime such as this should be left undisturbed, at least until the body has been removed?"

The Colonel gave him a reproachful look, then, judging that seeing his master's body subject to such appalling treatment could cause even the most experienced manservant to forget their station, his face softened. "I think it would be fair to say that my methods have been called unorthodox more times than I care to remember. But take heart, and know that I will bag the bounder who murdered your master."

The butler's mouth twisted into a half smile, and he nodded his head slightly. "Your reputation is well known throughout the Empire, sir. If you say that you will catch the evil man who did this, then I believe you. Any help that I can be, you only have to ask."

The Colonel waved the key under his nose. "I have but one question for you. This is the key to that room?"

The butler replied in the affirmative.

The Colonel bent forward until their noses were almost touching. "The *only* key?"

The butler did not flinch. "Yes, sir."

"There could be no way that this key could have been stolen and a duplicate made?"

"No, sir."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, sir. The master never let it out of his possession. And besides that, when the master was installed in his office, a duplicate would be useless."

"How so?"

The butler bade the Colonel enter the room with him. I followed, being sure, for the time being at least, to concentrate on looking at the door and not what lay on the floor. From the corner of my eye I could see that the room was draped with white muslin sheets, many displaying deep red stains. I gagged. I could choose what I looked at, but not what I smelled. The room was rank with the odour of blood, and worse – that of the sewer. I removed my kerchief from my top pocket and covered my mouth and nose, not that it did much good. The butler was showing the

Colonel the inside of the door. There were three stout bolts riveted to the wood. "The master always shot all three bolts home when installed in the room, so unlocking the door when he was within would be fruitless."

The Colonel stroked his moustache as he looked at the thick ironwork. "And these were all in place at the time of the murder?"

"Yes, sir. You can see where they pulled themselves free of the frame as the hinges gave way."

My friend grabbed the uppermost bolt and flicked it in and out with a flourish several times, observing it closely as he did so. Without taking his eyes from it, he spoke again.

"Now then, my man. You asked what I am intending to do. It seems obvious to me, but I suppose I had better spell it out. You are going to leave my associate and I in the room. Then I will lock the door, as your master did on that fateful night, leaving the key in the hole and sliding these three bolts home. I will then remain within until I have figured out exactly what happened, down to the minutest detail. Is that clear?"

The butler, with furrowed brow, nodded. The Colonel, who had been standing with his back to him, span around so that they faced. When he spoke again, his voice was loud and hard. "I said, *is that clear*? Contrary to popular belief, *I do not have eyes in the back of my head*!"

The butler, taken aback, stammered a yes. The Colonel returned to examining the door. "I would ask you to inform the rest of the household of what is afoot. And to leave us be, whatever you might hear coming from this side of the door. Understood?"

This time the butler spoke his answer, and then immediately asked to be excused. I did not blame him. To be the brunt of the Colonel's foul temper was bad enough. For it to happen while your nostrils were full of the stench of the charnel house was another thing entirely. I almost wished I could follow him. But it was too late. In the blink of an eye, the Colonel had slammed the door, turned the key in the lock and rammed the three bolts home. He turned to me and smiled. We were alone. Just us, and what remained of the late Magnus Rocester.

* * *

WHEN the Colonel had the bit between his teeth, he was a fast worker. It took him seconds to rip all the sheets from where they had been placed, revealing the astonishing extent to which Rocester's body had been torn apart. Smythe had not been exaggerating when he had claimed that pieces had been "scattered" across the room. There was hardly a surface that wasn't splattered with clotted brown blood, and pieces of tattered pink flesh were stuck to the wallpaper, hanging from light fittings and splayed across table tops. Here and there sat pieces of offal, some of which I recognised from the biology books the Colonel had insisted I read and digest. Here a spleen, there what looked like a kidney. The better part of a heart, the life-giving pipes exposed to the air and empty, lay on the hearth rug. Eventually, there was but one covering remaining - that which shielded our eyes from the sight of the body itself. Giving me no time to compose myself, the Colonel tore it away, and I was face to face with the murdered man.

I am proud to say that I did not flinch, nor did my stomach rebel, as I took in the extent of his injuries. Every word that Smythe had uttered was true, and more besides. The entire corpse was tattered and torn, the pale skin lying ripped from the body like ribbons, the empty chest cavity had been pulled open so far that it was easy to observe the spinal column. The face, now forever wide-eyed and staring, was skinless and for all the world looked like an anatomical drawing, the muscles still stretched across the bone of the skull and jaw. The mouth was half open, and I noted that it looked like some foreign body had been placed inside. I said as much to the Colonel – the first words uttered since the door was closed. He said nothing, but indicated with his cane a gaping wound in the vicinity of Rocester's pelvis. What should have been there was nowhere to be seen. I realised

then the full extent of the depravities performed on the body.

I will not bore you with the intricacies of our forensic search of that terrible room, which took many long hours. Suffice to say that we painstakingly searched every nook and cranny for clues, and found not one. The room was roughly twenty feet square, sparsely furnished apart from the large writing desk, its attendant chair and its more comfortable cousin next to the stove. The walls were lined with bookcases in the main, all piled high with logbooks and ledgers full of tiny neat handwriting which must have been Rocester's. The only wall space of any size not taken up with Rocester's business dealing was instead dominated by a huge, ornamental mirror, which sat above the mantel and cast a perfect reflection of us performing our grim duties.

* * *

AND then, it was over. We had exhausted all avenues, and we stood, facing each other in that foul room. The Colonel gave me a rueful smile and then turned away, regarding himself in the mirror.

"Well, Amby." He said, adjusting his tie slightly. "Do you have the answer?"

I smiled, despite the situation, for we had played out this particular conversation many times before. "No, sir," I replied. "But I am sure you are about to illuminate and astonish me."

In his reflection, his eyes flickered to meet mine and then looked away. He resumed his preening. I noted he looked slightly flustered, which was not something I was accustomed to seeing his face betray.

"Well, no. I'm afraid that on this occasion, I haven't got the Dickens."

I was so astonished I rocked back on my heels, conscious that Rocester's ruined body lay just behind me. All that escaped from my lips was a stuttered "But." I had never known my friend to be outfoxed, hoodwinked or thwarted by any given situation, be it amorous pygmies or lady prize fighters. And yet there he stood, admitting just that, still staring at his own reflection, and failing to meet my gaze.

"It is true, my dear Amby. There is no possible way that someone could have got into this room, hidden from sight, murdered Rocester in such a way and escaped without being spotted by the staff, Inspector Smythe or any of the other police officers in attendance last night. Still, I will not be beaten by this. As I always say, if you eliminate all the possible answers, the only solution must be the impossible. The only conclusion I can draw is… *what the blazes*?"

His eyes had widened as they saw something in the mirror. From the angle I stood I could only see reflected The Colonel and the gore-spattered bookcase behind him. He turned and looked towards the door, then back into the mirror. Then with a yelp, he ran to the door and tested it, muttering the question "firm and locked?" before returning to his station in front of the hearth.

I opened my mouth to ask of him what he was doing, but he must have anticipated this for, before I had uttered a sound, he lifted a powerful hand to quieten me. Other than that, he did not register my presence in the room. In the past couple of seconds his usual ruddy complexion had been drained of colour, and I could see in the glass that his eyes were moving from right to left, as if following, reflected in the mirror, the movement of something across the floor behind him, and therefore, behind me also. I looked over my shoulder, but could only see the corpse. Which, of course, was quite still.

The only noise in the room was our breathing, but I could see the Colonel's large frame begin to tense as his eyes continued to follow what they saw. Once again I looked round, but could see nothing out of the ordinary – or rather, I could see plenty that was far beyond ordinary, but nothing new.

Then with a cry of "I have you, you devil!" he moved, as quick as a jungle cat, leaping across the leather-topped desk, ink pots, jotters and trays scattering in his wake. He disappeared behind the substantial piece of furniture, and I could hear grunts of exertion as he wrestled with something on the floor. I stood, rooted to

the spot with incomprehension, as the noises grew more strained, and the chair behind the desk was knocked to the floor. Then, the sounds of struggles stopped, and my friend rose to his feet, looking down at something on the floor, hidden from my view. He raised a hand to his face, at first I thought to mop his brow. But as I looked, I realised something was terribly wrong. He touched his cheek and then pulled his fingers away, to reveal that they were stained a deep crimson. I noticed that his usually-immaculate white shirt was marred by a red stain which was growing by the moment. Then he turned to look directly at me, and I gasped in horror at what I saw.

The whole side of his face was ruptured with an enormous scar, which ran from forehead to chin. Where his eye had once been was now a deep black hole, tendrils of torn ligament hanging from the wound like the arms of an anemone. It was as if time had slowed down. I stared, unable to take in what I was seeing. One side of my friend's face was normal, the same one I shared breakfast with every morning. The other was a ruined, gory mess. He held out a hand to me and opened his mouth as if to speak. I could hear someone screaming, a high-pitched, womanly noise. It was me.

The Colonel gave me one last look from his remaining eye, and his huge body shook as if it had been subject to an enormous shock. Then again. And again. He fell forward onto the desk, and across his arched back I could see three tears in the material of his coat, through which more blood started to pour.

I turned and ran for the door, hot tears filling my eyes, and began to hammer on the unyielding wood, screaming for someone to come to my assistance. Then, from behind me, I heard someone laughing.

I turned to look, vain hope that this was all some terrible practical joke clouding my judgement. The sound, a low, guttural noise, half chuckle, half cough, was not coming from the body of my friend – it was coming from behind the solid barrier of the desk. I took a step forward, and as I did so, noticed movement to my right – my reflection in the mirror, moving into view. And my eye, caught by my image, noticed something else, something terribly wrong with what it was being shown. The room seen in the mirror was far more brightly lit than the one I inhabited. The reason for this was clear. In the reflection, the door was wide open, allowing light from the windows on the landing to pour in. Despite my circumstances, I turned to look. And sure enough, behind me, the *real* door, the one in my world, was still locked and bolted.

The laughing stopped, and was replaced by a scraping, rustling sound. I tore my gaze from the lying looking glass and watched, transfixed, as a hand came into view, grabbing the top of the desk. Then another, this one clutching a long, thin knife. Both the implement and the hands were stained a deep, dark red. These were followed by the top of a balding head, long strands of greasy black hair flopping across dirty white skin. The creature behind the desk continued to rise, revealing a high, wrinkled forehead, tiny black eyes, a thin, cruel nose and a wide, sneering mouth surrounded by thin, grey lips. It was the face of a fiend from the darkest pits of hell. I can remember trying to swallow, but my mouth and throat being so dry that I could not achieve even this simple motor function. As I write this I wonder, as I am sure you do, dear reader, why I did not turn tail and flee when I had the chance. I can only report that such thoughts did not enter my head. I felt as though the entire scene was being played out on a stage in front of me, such was the unreality of it all. And the creature seemed to be aware of my paralysis. Almost lazily, it rose to it full height – which cannot have been more than four feet tall, and grabbed the shoulder of my mortally injured friend, flipping him so he now lay on his back across the desk. The Colonel's breathing was harsh and laboured, one hand was shaking uncontrollably. For the briefest of seconds, what could have passed for a look of concern flashed across the fiend's features. Then, with one movement it used the knife to open the Colonel's body from groin to sternum, the blade slicing through clothing, skin and

soft tissue with an ease I would not have thought possible, slippery entrails and gallons of gore cascading from the wound across the desktop and onto the floor.

I am ashamed to say that this was the last thing I saw. Darkness came upon me in a flash and I fainted dead away.

* * *

I KNOW not how long I lay unconscious in that room. I awoke to a tremendous cacophony of shouts and hammering. I do know that when I tried to move my head to see where the row was coming from, the skin on my face seemed stuck to its resting place. I pulled it away and looked up wildly as the door finally gave way to the second pounding it had received in less than a day. I moved my hand to shield my eyes from the light that poured in through the doorway, and realised both that I was holding something and that my clothes seemed heavy and sodden.

I was relieved to see that the first man to enter the room was someone I knew only too well – the Colonel's old friend Inspector Smythe. I tried to smile, but in return he fixed me with a look of wide-eyed horror. Still wanting for memories of what had passed, I sat up properly and tried to take in my surroundings. I appeared to be sitting at a desk. I looked at what I held in my hand. It was a knife. Then came the realisation that the desk was covered with blood. And that my hands were covered with blood. And that the knife was covered with blood. And with that realisation, my memory returned and I began to scream once more.

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SO, dear reader, that is a full account of how I came to be in this situation. Neither the police nor the court saw fit to believe my tale, and if I am honest, I cannot blame them. I was found in a locked room with a murdered man, the bloody weapon clutched in my hand. It was an open-and-shut case. They even saw fit to charge me with the murder of Rocester too, although I believe that the evidence in that case was far more circumstantial. Then again, what is easier to believe – that I somehow snuck into the room to kill Rocester, knowing that my good friend would be called in to investigate so I could then kill him in the same manner, or that a strange demon came out of the mirror to attack Rocester, and then returned to kill my benefactor?

I know that I cut a weak and feeble figure here in this rank, dark gaol, and I also know what the gossips outside are now claiming about my relationship with the Colonel. The Colonel! Oh, how I miss him! Not a minute passes when I do not think of him. He would know what to do. He would be able to solve my predicament. But he is no longer here, and I must stand on my own two feet. It is lucky that in a place such as this, looks and build such as mine still count for something, and that favours can be bought. I cannot face the hangman's noose, you see. And tomorrow is the day ordained for my appointment. I have pondered long and hard about my exit from this world, and I wish not for the ignominious death that the rope holds. I desire to pass away quietly, here, in this cell. To that end I have managed to cajole a guard to help me. Just an hour ago he passed me the means to take my own life. A sliver of glass, perfect to open my veins. He has promised that no-one will check on my cell for a while.

But oh! How my heart skipped when I saw from whence the jagged shard had been procured. I suppose that to anyone else, a piece of glass is a piece of glass is a piece of glass, and it will perform its function as well as any other. But why did it have to be from a *mirror*?

As I sit here writing this final paragraph, the shard sits face down on the rough table next to me. I dread to think what I might see if I look into it. What ter-

rors it might unleash. But I know that I will. Forgive me, mother, for everything.

The last manuscript of Ambrose Dubois ends there. But at the bottom, scrawled in a different hand, is written the following:

Ambrose Dubois was found dead in his cell at 3.30am on November 24th, 1894. He had wrought the most terrible indignities on his person, using the same piece of glass he refers to in the manuscript. The coroner stated that the wounds he had inflicted on himself "beggared belief" before recording a verdict of suicide.

RC-H.

Gory tales from England's gaols IV